Kathleen Greenfield.

THE FLIGHT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HALF IN EARNEST
EARTH
APRIL PANHASARD
THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART
THE INDIVIDUAL
AUTUMN
THE BEST IN LIFE
THE HIDDEN VALLEY
THE BREATHLESS MOMENT
TORQUIL'S SUCCESS
STORIES OF LOVE AND LAUGHTER
THE SPELL OF SIRIS
YOUTH WINS
THE RELUCTANT IMPOSTOR
THE HURCOTTS
THE SEVEN LOVERS AND OTHER STORIES
THE LADDER OF FOLLY

THE BODLEY HEAD

THE FLIGHT

BY

MURIEL HINE

LONDON
JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD.

First Published, November, 1922
Reprinted, December, 1922
Popular Crown 8vo Edition, 1925
Reprinted, 1926
Cheap Edition, 1929

Made and Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

To
GERARD GRIERSON

"M. de La Rochefoucauld dit, On pardonne tant que l'on aime.' On pourrait dire aussi bien, ' On ne pardonne pas tant que l'on aime.' "

SAINTE-BEUVE.

Part I

HECTOR TAMER OF HORSES

Eh ! oui, on s'épouse sans se connaître. Voulez vous donc qu'il n'y ait plus de mariages ? "

HENRY BEQUE.

CHAPTER I

THE war was still dragging on, yet to country eyes London showed but little change. In the Park gay dresses fluttered and Mrs. Logue, crossing the Row, glanced down with a touch of discomfort at her own simple costume and the little parcels that swung from her wrist. Swiftly the reaction followed and she smiled with the confidence of a woman long released from town conventions and happy in her chosen life.

The crowd on the grass was beginning to thin as she made her way up the slight incline behind the statue of Achilles and found a seat in an empty row.

It was one of those warm and sultry evenings more suggestive of August than of June that constantly overtake the earlier part of the Season, as though the air had been exhausted already by the pleasure-seekers. Above the low arch with its screened guns, she could hear the ceaseless hum of the traffic; waves of sound that rose and fell and, cutting sharply across its bass, the shrill treble of voices and laughter. Only the trees were silent and still.

"They know," thought Sheila, "they haven't to join in an eternal questioning of the purpose of creation. They're safe, in an age of scepticism."

Her eyes sought the leafy branches, so perfect in their symmetry yet each bearing its own design, and returned to the scene before her and the human beings whose little lives and loves, and comedies of errors, were being played out like a puppet-show for these centuries-old spectators.

A few rows in front of her, she could see a tall man in khaki, erect, facing a girl who lounged, with the nonchalance of the modern type, on one of two seats detached from their neighbours. Presently he saluted, wheeled round and marched off, with an air of truculence that brought a smile to the onlooker's lips.

The girl, so suddenly deserted, watched his absorption in the crowd of people hurrying from the Park and gave a delicate shrug of her shoulders.

There was something familiar in the action and at that moment she turned sideways to glance at a passing couple.

"It's Clodagh Laidlaw!" Mrs. Logue impulsively rose to her feet. She could not mistake the youthful profile; that upward tilt of the chin, and the nose, too *retroussé* for beauty yet adding a hint of eagerness to the irregular charm of the face; nor the grace of the slim body that, even in its careless pose, held a hint of strong vitality.

As she crossed the intervening space, Mrs. Logue recalled her husband's summing-up of this young friend whom they both welcomed in their quiet country home: "She looks as if you could knock her down with a straw, yet she's strong as a young eagle, and filled with the very spirit of life." "And pretty?" his wife had suggested. "Good Lord, no! 'Worse,'" Val had quoted with the slow smile that transformed his face. "She's the sort of child who would break any artist's heart and yet remain unpaintable. No, my dear"—he had forestalled the inevitable suggestion—"I'm not going to try. I know my limits."

Mrs. Logue was smiling now at the memory of their argument as she came up behind the girl and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

The dark head turned with a start.

"Why, it's you, Sheila!" The hazel eyes were lit with a warm pleasure, discounted in her next remark:

"What a sell! I thought it was Aunt Helen, bearing down like the Judgment Day. Where have you sprung from? Come and sit here." She patted the chair by her side and added with a mocking curve of her lips, "In a discarded lover's seat."

"I saw! I was just behind you," Mrs. Logue confessed as she slipped into the vacant place. "I think at least you might show some remorse?"

"For that mass of conceit? Not I! He seemed to think it a signal honour and that I should fall into his arms," Clodagh responded indignantly in a low-pitched voice, musical but veiled by a faint huskiness. "It's all Aunt Helen's fault. She has literally thrown him at me for the past month, although I showed as well as I could that I had no earthly use for him. Oh, you needn't laugh! Or frown either. It's only hurt his vanity."

"He may have been very fond of you," Sheila suggested solemnly but with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Fond! The fact is he wants to marry—thinks it's time and so forth—and is looking about for a wife. So he chooses me, as he'd choose a hunter. Thinks my paces would suit him, and is prepared to pay the price: loss of his freedom and my keep! In return, he presents me with his 'prospects,' his well-known relations, his uncle's money, and even his exploits at the Front. In a safe corner with the Staff!" Her lip curled. "He wouldn't believe in my refusal, so at last I told him pretty plainly that I didn't care what he'd done or what he expected to inherit, but I couldn't stand what he *was*!"

"Well, I don't wonder he was annoyed."

"Wait! I haven't finished yet." Clodagh looked merciless. "He showed, then, what a worm he was; accused me of 'encouragement' and actually wound up by suggesting that he was well out of it and that I would regret it as time went on! See the point? I'm getting ancient." She stuck out her slender feet, stared at them

and gave way to mischievous laughter. "What a life! Give me Achilles." She waved her hand to the statue. "He'd swoop down and seize a woman because he loved her and meant to have her. I'm sick of these tepid London men!"

"You might find Achilles a hard master?"

"Well, I like strength—we could always fight," Clodagh responded cheerfully, her eyes still on the vast figure, shield aloft, challenging the stream of over-dressed mortals. "Nice back, isn't it? They talk about the beauty of the feminine form, but it can't really beat a man's. Those clean lines and the tense muscles, instead of silly soft curves. I know your Val would agree with me. How is he? And where are you staying?"

"We're only up for the day. I've been shopping"—Mrs. Logue touched her parcels—"and I thought I'd have a rest in the Park before I joined Val at the station. He's taken Timmy to the Zoo—his birthday treat. He's six to-day."

"The duck!" said Clodagh. After a minute she added, "I wish I were going back with you."

"Come?"

"I can't. I'm full up with engagements." A shadow fell across her face. "I've got to go home and brave Aunt Helen! The 'discarded one' was dining with us to-night, and has left me to make his excuses. Mean trick, isn't it? Of course she'll guess, and it won't be pleasant. When I think of the food that man's eaten! In war-time too." The corners of her lips tilted. "A waste, from Aunt Helen's standpoint. Still, why should I be forced to marry?"

"There's no need that I can see." But Sheila Logue's face was thoughtful. An orphan, dependent on her aunt, Clodagh's life was not always easy and she knew the girl had her mother's pride.

"I'm not so sure." Clodagh frowned. "There's Margot, for instance. I'm in the way at Lowndes Square.

They never say so, but I feel it. I've enough money for my dress and travelling expenses when I visit, but it wouldn't go far as an income. I'd always planned to cut adrift and support myself, once my training was over, but now that my voice has gone——" She paused and shrugged her shoulders again.

Under her studied indifference Sheila divined the girl's despair.

"It may return," she said gently.

"Not the ghost of a chance." Clodagh stared straight before her. The statue of Achilles was blurred. She saw, instead, the white ward of a French hospital at the end of her long war-work, and the grave, compassionate face of the doctor pronouncing the verdict that meant for her the death-blow of all her hopes. That beautiful contralto voice irretrievably damaged by diphtheria. She tucked a hand through her friend's arm. "It's good to talk to you again. I'm feeling at a loose end and you always understand."

"It was cruelly hard." The tears were not far from Sheila's eyes. "But, whatever you do, don't marry just to get out of present worries. You'd only regret it when too late. Or, perhaps, meet some one you really cared for." She spoke from bitter experience, remembering the lonely, unhappy years by the side of her first husband before her friendship with Valentine Logue.[1]

"Perhaps you're right. Though I rather think it's better not to love a man but just to choose a good pal. Then you can't be disillusioned. Like Mother!" The hazel eyes were averted.

Mrs. Logue hesitated, reluctant to open a painful subject. She knew the family history and the main facts of the long-past Laidlaw divorce; how it had embittered the handsome woman who had been one of her own Mother's friends, and had turned her into a cold and captious guardian of her child. She knew too

[1] See *The Hidden Valley*, by Muriel Hine.

that, after Colonel Laidlaw's marriage to the beautiful Mrs. Winterton, Mrs. Laidlaw had flung herself into every social diversion, squandering her alimony and eventually leaving Clodagh dependent on her two aunts. She was one of the many innocent victims of a happy union wrecked by passion.

"So I can't look on it all as a game, as Margot does," the girl confided. "It's a risky adventure, and I think I shall keep out of it. You see, I can remember the time when Mother and Father adored each other. So what's the good of counting on *love*?" There was scorn in the way she uttered the word. "All the same, the sort of stereotyped proposal I've just had sickens me. It's so flat! But everything's flat since I came back from France. As Aunt Helen would say, it's 'unsettled' me!" She smiled with a trace of contempt. "The usual reproof of the middle-aged who have stayed in comfort at home." She glanced sideways at her friend and suddenly brightened. "Don't worry, old dear. I shall take up typing, or a tea-shop!" She paused to bow to a passing acquaintance who had raised his hat to her. "That's Margot's latest, young Archdale. She might do worse. He's poor but honest. If it comes to anything? Funny, isn't it, that Margot, who's really keen, never seems to pull it off? Although she has always a pack of boys, laughing and chaffing and flirting with her. It's hard luck on Aunt Helen, who thinks there's no one to touch her daughter. Naturally she gets annoyed when men take to me and I turn them down. I dread going home to-night—I shall be in disgrace for weeks! But what's the matter with Margot? I mean, why doesn't it happen to her?"

"Because she's *too* keen perhaps." Sheila disliked Clodagh's cousin.

"But she's awfully pretty," objected Clodagh, "and very amusing when she likes. Every one wants to dance with her and to give her a good time. The worst of it

is, it's her fourth season and they're feeling the pinch at Lowndes Square. No dividends and the heavy taxation. They only entertain for her. And here am I—another failure!" She laughed, aware of its touch of humour.

"Have you never——" Sheila checked herself.

"Never what? Out with it!" The girl was looking mischievous. She divined her companion's thought.

Mrs. Logue proceeded bravely:

"Never met anyone who seemed—well, worth the risk we spoke about?"

"Let me think?" Clodagh, provokingly, began to count on her fingers. "I'm weeding them out," she explained. "You see, I've had a lot of pals, but there was always something wrong. The worthy ones were invariably plain, or they just came up to my shoulder. I can't stand a man like a fly, even with a 'heart of gold'—or a pocketful, which goes further! The other extreme are usually spoilt. That's part of the trouble, why I sit and adore Achilles! I could bear with him at breakfast. But I'm forgetting *the* exception." Her eyes danced. She drew herself up from her old lounging attitude and lifted a slim, impressive hand. "Listen to my one romance! The story of 'Hector tamer of horses'?"

Mrs. Logue laughed outright.

"You seem to run to Ancient Greece?"

"Ah, those were good times to live in," Clodagh announced solemnly. "The Olympians kept things moving. Talk about modern favouritism! There's nothing to beat the old gods. Well, where was I? Oh, yes—Hector! It's not a very 'nice' affair—not what Aunt Helen would 'approve'—but he really was good to look at, sitting there on that brute of a horse, waiting for me every morning as I crossed to Albert Gate. It was the first year of the war and we had the Park to ourselves. Mrs. Lawrence had lent me her mare and I used to ride at seven o'clock before most people were

about. The first time I noticed him, he was having a battle with his mount, which wouldn't stand. I saw the start, then cantered round and came in for the finish A Homeric contest! That's why I christened the rider Hector. And he really looked like a hero; the best-built man I've ever seen. Bar Achilles," she added, smiling. "You know the sort of silent link there is between all lovers of sport? He glanced up as I returned as if to say: 'I've beaten him.' The horse stood, covered with lather, rebellious still but subdued. I smiled—I couldn't help it. Well, after that, on the stroke of seven, he was always there in the same place, just where the ride joins the Row. That was all—we never spoke. For a whole week! But the last day, as I set out from Lowndes Square, at the corner I saw a taxi drawn up and Hector in khaki, his kit piled beside the driver, obviously off to the Front. I guessed he'd been waiting there—it was close to the side-door of Woollands'—and, as I passed, he saluted me. This is the Early-Victorian part, brimming over with sentiment." Clodagh was mocking at herself, but the colour was warm in her cheeks. "Her 'warrior to the war is gone'! No, I *didn't* 'bend from my saddle and pin a rose in his coat,' but I called out: 'Good Luck!' and he said something—I couldn't catch it. When I got across Knightsbridge I looked back and saw his taxi roll by and his face turned, watching me. A few months later I went out to France and I used to wonder if I should meet him. But I never did. He must have been well over six foot, as far as I could judge on horseback, and that's not useful in the trenches. Poor old Hector!" Her eyes were clouded, she was caught in this grim reminder of war. "'Thus held they funeral for Hector tamer of horses,'" she quoted.

Sheila Logue, watching the change in the vivid face, wondered how deep was the mark left by the passing adventure. At times she found it difficult to understand

the new generation. She herself had been a rebel against the Edwardian conventions so dear to her own mother; but now there seemed a greater gulf between herself and the modern girl, hardened by the realities of war and independent work. Yet she judged the change to be superficial. Romance had not departed from life. In the new generation it had gained a more subtle significance under an outward lack of emotion. The modern girl was less hypnotized by the pomp and excitement of a wedding; inclined to choose deliberately a man who came up to her sense of fitness, morally and physically, or else to remain free and unmarried. She chose; she was not content to be chosen, since spinsterhood had lost its slur and so many professions were open to women.

The older woman could not judge from Clodagh's expression what was passing in her mind, but the fact that across the years of grim reality in France she could yet visualize so clearly the scenes she had just described was not without its significance, and Sheila risked a leading question.

"What did you really like about him?"

Clodagh gave a little start.

"Hector? Oh, just his not speaking."

"But he didn't know you," the other objected and as she said it, felt "old-fashioned."

"No, but that didn't matter," Clodagh responded cheerfully. "You see, it was in that first winter when every one had gone mad and talked without thinking to total strangers and especially to the soldiers. It would have been so easy for him." The light faded from her face. "Oh, dash! Here's Margot."

A dainty figure was advancing, waving a long *suède* glove. The arm from which it had been removed was rounded and dimpled as a child's, white, with that peculiar lustre which accompanies auburn hair. About the girl's whole person was a super-feminine attraction, from the choice of her fanciful rose-coloured frock to the deliberate

provocation of her wide blue eyes with their gold-tipped lashes. She was as pretty as a doll, small and delicately proportioned and with a doll's artificial air of surprised innocence. Yet, in her way, she was clever. She could wind her parents round her finger, and compel loyalty from her cousin; attract a following of men, and fascinate girl-friends—whom she used but rarely helped—and she had achieved a certain position in the gay circle she affected. No party was complete without Margot, Margot and her pack of boys. Yet no man took her seriously.

Mrs. Logue, studying her as she approached, thought that here was a type as old as the world, the "parasite woman," born under Venus and profiting by the passions of men; a type which, within the bounds of convention, has withheld the progress of womanhood more surely than that without the pale. Beside her, Clodagh Laidlaw looked like a healthy stripling, long-limbed, and lazy for the nonce, but full of hidden energy, disguising under her careless speech both integrity and clean pride. No wonder sane men preferred her when it came to the question of marriage, but Mrs. Logue realized more than ever how difficult her position in Mrs. Heriot's house must be since her free and active life abroad.

Regretting the broken *tête-à-tête*, she glanced at her watch and rose to her feet.

"I must fly or I shall be late for the train. Write to me and tell me when you can manage a week-end? And —don't forget what I said!"

She spoke quickly, for Margot was near—too near for her plan of escape.

"Why, it's Mrs. Logue!" The vision in pink swept down on her, hand outstretched. Under the shadowing black lace hat Margot smiled entrancingly. "How nice and cool you look! I wish you'd tell me the secret?" She cultivated country friends. It was useful to have an excuse sometimes for a long motor-drive with an

admirer; an excuse that would satisfy her parents. "You're not going?"

"Afraid I must." Sheila relinquished the soft fingers that had lingered in her own. "I've only just time to get to the station. Give my love to your mother. Good-bye!" She was off, aware of the parting twinkle in Clodagh's expressive eyes.

Margot took the vacant seat, crossed her pretty feet in their high-heeled shoes and gave a sigh of relief.

"Glad she's departed—I'm tired out. What a country cousin she looks! And I can remember her quite smart in the days when she lived in North Audley Street. I suppose it's marrying an artist and that he chooses her clothes for her? All right in a picture but pathetic in real life. She ought to have face-massage too, she's getting lines round her eyes."

"Much she cares," Clodagh retorted. "She'll always be a pretty woman. And she'll last longer than London fakes!"

"Well, you *are* in a nice mood!" Margot pouted. "I only thought you might give her a hint. No woman *wants* to grow old. Which reminds me, I've been to Roehampton with Mrs. Hinkley—renovated! Calls it a 'rest cure in Paris,' but Edye told me all about it. First they removed all the upper skin, then they took in the loose folds, cut them away and stitched them up. Not a scar—it's wonderful! She looks about thirty now. The only thing they didn't do was to drown her eldest grandson. An oversight, Edye says."

Clodagh laughed indifferently. Margot dived into her bag, produced a worn powder-puff and passed it carefully over her face.

"I'm broiled—the *sun* at Roehampton! Not a single seat in the shade until we found Ian Strangway and he gave us his and fetched another. By the way, I've asked him to come to-night."

"To the dance?" Clodagh looked surprised. "But

we've got two men already. Archdale and—oh, I forgot! Seaton has thrown it up." Her voice was a trifle too careless.

"Quarrelled?" Margot was smiling.

"No." Clodagh was not to be drawn. "He has to go down into the country."

"Where did you see him?"

"Why, here of course. He spotted me and came up to explain. I promised to tell Aunt Helen. He was rather rushed, you see. By the way, we ought to be getting back." She yawned and rose to her feet.

"I might have asked Sir Ian to dinner." Margot looked regretful. "It's too late now. He's only up for a week and I don't know where he's staying. How stupid of Seaton! Mother'll be angry. Why didn't we know before? It was all settled weeks ago. I believe——"

Clodagh moved off.

"You can believe what you like." She threw the remark over her shoulder. "You ought to know what men are. Even your beloved 'Arch' sometimes changes his little mind. Come on! It's getting late."

They made their way down the slope towards the path within the rails that offers such a quiet contrast to the traffic and restless crowd of Knightsbridge.

Said Margot suddenly:

"You needn't tell Mother that I've been with Mrs. Hinkley this afternoon. I didn't arrange it, it just happened. I ran across her at Dora's lunch."

"All right." Clodagh nodded.

"She doesn't like her," Margot proceeded. "But she's really rather a good sort, only Mother's so old-fashioned. One must move with the times. If the 'new rich' like to feed us—and feed us well—why should we thwart their charity? It's Providence adjusting the balance. Let us spoil the profiteers!" Her red lips parted, showing beneath the beautiful, even little teeth.

She gave her cousin a sly glance. "We all have our 'mission in life'—so Aunt Addy assures me. If it's only turning down eligible young men on the Staff!"

"Now, look here!" Clodagh halted and faced the mockery that lit the wide and impertinent blue eyes. "I'm about fed up, Margot. You're always expecting me to be loyal and keep your secrets from Aunt Helen, yet you never respect mine. Since you've guessed the truth—and I wouldn't marry Seaton Fylkin if he were the only man left on earth—there's no need to publish the fact. If you were anything of a pal you'd back me up and see me through this. Why don't you?"

It was a challenge.

"Well, you never asked me, for one thing." Margot looked aggrieved. "I'll try and soothe Mother, if you like, though I think you're a little fool to refuse him! He's a jolly good match. His uncle's 80, and he'll come in for the money and title. What more do you want?"

"I want peace, if I can get it. I'm tired of being in perpetual disgrace. It lasted for weeks after Warburton went, another of your Mother's fancies. The fact is, marriage is in the air. Men come home on leave and the sudden change is too much for them, after that hell out there. No wonder they lose their heads! You see, I've seen both sides." Her expression had changed, suddenly thoughtful. "But the point is"—she looked at her cousin, her hazel eyes a shade wistful—"are you going to play fair? If not, I'll tell Aunt Helen myself."

"All right, old thing." Margot nodded. She had nothing to gain by a quarrel. "You needn't look so dramatic. I never really cared for Seaton. He's spoilt. It will probably do him good—and he'll settle down and marry his cook! Then you can rise in your glory and say: 'I told you so,' to Mother. And Mother will fall on your neck and declare: '*I* saved you from that, dear child. I always warned you against the man!'"

Clodagh laughed. The picture was true, one of her cousin's uncanny touches of insight into character. They moved on in a silence that, for once, held a note of understanding. Clodagh broke it with a question:

"How are you going to explain where you met Sir Ian——" She paused. "I've forgotten his surname."

"Strangway—think of 'Strangway's Sweets'! Very good they are too. Let me see?" She puckered her brows. "Oh, it's quite simple. I met him in the Park, where I went with you and Mrs. Logue. A highly respectable proceeding! And we *both* ran across Seaton, on his way to call and leave his excuses at Lowndes Square. They're a bit thin, though. Couldn't we invent a dangerous illness for his uncle? Mother would jump at that."

"And write a letter of sympathy!" Clodagh suggested, smiling. "Better leave things as they are, and tell her we've found a substitute. Have I ever met Strangway? I don't seem to remember him."

"No, you were in France at the time when I first ran across him. He was in Edye's hospital and we saw quite a lot of him. Good-looking, but not my style. Big and fair, too tall for me—anyhow, at a dance. Still, you'll like him. He's full of go, keen on every sort of sport and doesn't mind what he pays for it. He must be pretty well off—has a place, I believe, in Gloucestershire—but I don't know how he's made his money."

"Through 'Strangway's Superfine Sweets,' of course." Clodagh chuckled. "Sounds rather cloying. Still, anything's better than Seaton to-night. Thank Heaven, *that's* over!"

They turned down through Albert Gate.

CHAPTER II

CLODAGH stood before the mirror in her bedroom at the rear of the house stitching a button on her glove. The needle went in and out with a vicious thrust and her mouth was set in angry lines; for she guessed that her cousin had betrayed her.

Although Mrs. Heriot had accepted the excuses made for Seaton's absence with outward indifference, the atmosphere had been charged with silent disapproval during the dinner-hour whilst Margot flirted with Captain Archdale. Clodagh was certain that her aunt held the facts of the case, but was pledged to secrecy.

Even Uncle Edward had shared in his daughter's breach of faith. It was proved to the victim at dessert by a covert glance of sympathy as he pressed her to take a glass of port. She felt, not for the first time, that he was her only friend in the household. Although she rarely drank wine, she accepted the attention, with the result that her mood of rebellion was heightened by the stimulant and a warm colour glowed in her cheeks.

Now, as she studied herself in the glass, her task completed, she realized something of that vivid charm which was the main cause of Margot's spite and of Aunt Helen's maternal qualms.

In her dress of nut-brown *georgette*, with its sheath-like bodice and full skirt, she looked like a feather blown from the wing of a bird, to float on an autumn breeze. A cluster of hops was caught at the waist, with a trail of pale leaves that crossed one shoulder and fell to the hem

of her short skirt. Beneath it, her slender ankles and feet repeated the same colour-note, which glowed more strongly in a string of Chinese jade that swung from her neck and had once belonged to her mother. It could have told a poignant story of the early years of passionate love between Colonel Laidlaw and his wife.

A little comfort came to Clodagh as she looked back curiously into the brilliant hazel eyes confronting her in the glass. They were full of golden lights to-night, and her dark hair, drawn back from her forehead but loosened and curling over her ears, shone with the same lustre of youth. She had something that Margot lacked, for all her pink and white beauty and shallow vivacity: an appeal that went deeper than the flesh.

A sudden fancy came to Clodagh. She opened a drawer in the dressing-table and drew out another trail of leaves ending in a cluster of hops. In defiance of her dressmaker's taste she had removed it from its fellow, preferring the single streamer. She held it against her smooth forehead, studying the effect; then, cutting off the superfluous length, she secured it firmly round her temples.

A touch of mischief curved her lips. It would make Margot furious! For she was wearing a fillet herself, of silvery leaves with a knot of rosebuds that matched her petal-shaped flounces.

Clodagh, still smiling, gathered up her cloak and gloves and made her way downstairs, feeling the quiver of the hops as they brushed the nape of her slender neck. They gave out the ghost of a rustle, faint music in her ear, like the delicate peal of a knot of heather, warm on a sunny moor.

Margot was in the hall already, gloved, scented and coquettish, pirouetting before Archdale.

"That's the step——" She broke off and glanced with a dawning suspicion at Clodagh. "Hullo! What have you got in your hair? You look like an advertisement of

somebody's Hop Bitters! It doesn't suit you, my child. Does it?" She turned to Archdale.

He had the courage to own that he liked it.

"Well, come on!" said Margot shortly. "The car's been waiting for hours whilst Clodagh prepared an artistic finish." She held up her cheek for her mother to kiss and added maliciously, "To capture Sir Ian, I suppose? Clodagh likes a new man—they never stand the test of time!" She was off, fluttering down the steps, her rose-coloured shoes and stockings gleaming against the grey of the pavement. "Hop in, Hop Bitters!"

Clodagh smiled in the semi-darkness as she drew the rug over her knees.

"It would serve her right if I flirted with Arch," she thought. She could feel the young man's eyes still upon her; she had not missed his startled glance of admiration in the hall, when for once he had refused to dance to Margot's imperious piping. "But I won't. If she stoops to mean tricks, I'm not going to copy her."

On they went, through the London streets, veiled and mysterious, filled with restless pleasure-seekers trying to drown the remembrance of war. A young moon hung over the Park and, far away to the north, the clouds were dappled by a searchlight, ghostly finger-prints on the dangerous shield of the sky, like the work of an unseen hand, moving, that at any moment might press a spring and release the clamour of the guns. The shrouded lamps suggested danger, England no longer an island secured by its belt of sea and mighty fleet, but a part of Europe, the centre of war. Clodagh's thoughts turned to France. She felt a sudden distaste for this life of trivial pleasures and narrow desires, feminine jealousies and flirtations, after her years of work with the forces. Her rebellion against her guardian's verdict, that forbade all resumption of her labours, had reached the topmost notch to-night. If only she could go back! She checked

a sigh, mindful of Margot, who was prattling about the coming dance, given upon the eve of a wedding, that of the daughter of the house to an officer home on leave. It was to be one of those quiet functions followed by a honeymoon, curtailed and rendered pathetic by the imminent parting ahead—love and death in a mortal combat—familiar in those stirring times.

But to-night all was gaiety, excitement and congratulation, for the house teemed with young people, and youth, although it knows despair, holds the fullest measure of gallant hope.

As the two girls made their way upstairs to the cloak-room they encountered one of the few married women included in this bachelor party. Tall, fair, with her exquisite gown, she carried an air of challenge and of confidence in her ripe beauty that seemed to fascinate Margot.

" Lady Somerby," she whispered. " Isn't she lovely ? I don't wonder all the men are mad about her. They say she's engaged to Nigel Weir, though it isn't given out yet. You know—the man who wrote *Follow*, that dream of a waltz. He's younger than she is, by ten years. But that's the fashion nowadays ! This is the Golden Age for widows. Or perhaps the age for golden ones ! Lady Somerby has money, and men like their little comforts." She shrugged her shoulders airily. " Hullo ! Here's Susan, ' black-eyed Susan ' ! " She dived into a group of friends.

They went down, a merry crowd, Clodagh, whose years in France had cut her off from the younger set, slightly in the rear.

" I'm like the cat that walks alone," she decided as she watched her cousin. " I don't seem to mix. I wonder why ? Too hop-bitterish perhaps ? "

But when they arrived on the landing where the bride-to-be was receiving her guests and which was already packed with men, it was Clodagh's turn to be surrounded.

" Don't forget Sir Ian's coming," Margot warned her

mperiously. "*I'm* not going to take him on. I asked im for you."

Clodagh laughed.

"Thanks! So thoughtful." She was off, with an mpatient partner.

As they danced up the half-empty room, she could see ady Somerby just ahead in her golden dress with her raceful movements and wandering glance which skimmed he faces of the men and returned with a faint frown to he dark and handsome one above her. It struck Clodagh nstinctively that here was another who didn't "mix." n the man's aloof and sombre expression she divined he as there against his will at the mandate of his fair artner. He bore the unmistakable signs of the long train of life in the trenches. For a moment his brown yes met Clodagh's, read the sympathy in hers and oftened: one of those brief exchanges of thought more ubtle and convincing than words, holding the germ of a iendship independent of convention or sex. Then is head was bent to catch some question from Lady omerby's lips. As she passed the pair, Clodagh was urprised by the beautiful woman's glance of contempt- ous, thinly-veiled displeasure. It travelled over the ut-brown dress and dismissed the wearer from further otice. A moment later, the pair halted and Clodagh aw them leave the room, now filling fast with a gay hrong.

The noise of the band gathered volume. Above the nslaught of banjos and drum rose the thick negro voices, aised in unison, submerging the space in a wave of sen- uous excitement, forbidding any conversation or even equence of ideas. Clodagh, a born dancer, was lost in he physical joy of the moment, swaying to her partner's ill, a feather blown by the wind.

Suddenly, as they passed the band, there came a crash n the drum and the music ceased, guillotined, at the limax of thundering reverberation.

Her ears tingling, Clodagh stood, dazed yet subtly aware that her partner's arm had slipped from her waist. Then she heard Margot's voice:

"Oh, there you are! Here's Sir Ian."

A tall figure stood before her, broad-shouldered, finely proportioned, his left arm in a sling. She looked up at a pair of blue eyes that widened swiftly in a face bronzed by exposure—a face now as startled as her own.

"My cousin, Miss Laidlaw," said Margot, and whirled off, leaving the couple, mute, staring at one another.

The man recovered his wits first.

"May I have the next dance?"

Clodagh nodded. She was aware of her heightened colour and furiously annoyed with herself. The band was already preparing to start again and her partner had left her in Strangway's care. She could see no road of escape. Meanwhile, he was speaking:

"Thanks. Do you mind if we don't dance? I'm rather handicapped." He nodded towards his wounded member.

"Very well," said Clodagh coldly.

As they reached the door, she made an attempt to evade the *tête-à-tête*.

"As a matter of fact, I half promised this dance to the man who came with us, Captain Archdale. I'd for gotten!"

Strangway smiled.

"Oh, I'll square Arch. He's an old friend and I'm not going to let you off." He glanced at the girl. "Did you dream I would?" As she did not answer, he went on, "Let's get out of this. There's a place downstairs where we can talk in peace. Perhaps I'd better lead the way?"

She followed him, glad of a respite in which to face the situation. Should she pretend that this was the first meeting between them and brave it out? She foresaw it would be useless. Her surprise had been too evident

Even now, as she passed a glass in the hall and glanced quickly sideways, she was aware of her flushed cheeks. To behave like a callow schoolgirl! No, she must make a joke of it.

On went the tall figure, forcing a path through the crowd below. They negotiated further stairs, passed the kitchens and descended a flight of stone steps to find themselves in a bleak underground passage. Sir Ian opened a door facing them and switched on the light. Clodagh, surprised, saw a cellar, carpeted, furnished, and holding a stove.

"Our hostess's idea of a dug-out!" Strangway chuckled. "How do you like it? She tried to lure me down here once when I was dining and there was an air-raid. Do look at the hospital section!" He pointed to a table between the arm-chairs. It held a decanter, a box of biscuits, a roll of bandages and scissors, and a collection of little bags in khaki covering.

Clodagh smiled, against her will.

"What ever are those?"

"Gas masks! An obsolete pattern, of no use, but luckily she didn't know. They're in case of poison bombs. There's even one for the dog!"

He laughed, such a free and happy laugh that the girl suddenly felt at ease.

"Let's put them on and march upstairs?" she suggested, fingering the bags.

"No. I want to talk to you. Sit here." He caught up a cushion and placed it in one of the arm-chairs, then drew up the other facing hers. "Now," he leaned forward, his eyes on hers, "you remember me?"

"I remember your battle with the horse," she answered him composedly.

"Is that all?" He frowned, dissatisfied. "Not what I said when you wished me 'good luck!'?" As she did not respond, he went on quickly, "I've never ceased to bless you for that. It kept me safe, a sort of mascot!

I can tell you I've heard your voice in many a tight corner I knew then I should come back; that, some day. I should find you—though you've led me the devil of a dance!"

"I?"

"Yes, you, with your laughing eyes." His voice had a curious throb in it and Clodagh looked away, fighting against the contagion of the man's suppressed excitement. "The last time that I saw them was on a little country platform. It was the end of my leave; I was coming up from home and the train had slackened speed to run through a quiet station. I looked out, and there you were! I only caught a passing glimpse, but I can tell you what you wore. A coat like a man's, the collar turned up—it was raining—and a leather cap drawn down over your ears. I nearly jumped out, but it was too late. I did when we got to Reading, and took the next train back. I scoured that wretched little place. I even inquired at the pub! But nobody knew who you were. I had to be back at the Front next day—but anyhow, I'd seen you again." He stopped abruptly.

Clodagh nodded, hiding the surprise she felt.

"They wouldn't know me," she told him. "I wasn't staying there at all, but miles out, at a place called Albrey, a little village on the downs. We'd driven in—I remember now—and I asked at the station for a parcel. I was spending the week-end with the Logues—great friends of mine—and *I* was on leave. From France too. Rather funny!"

"Funny!" The word was an exclamation. "You mean to tell me you've been out there, whilst I've been spending my leaves in London, a place I hate, simply in order to hunt for you? It's the limit! What were you doing?"

"Driving," said Clodagh. "A car first, then all sorts of things. I've driven an ambulance and a lorry." She saw his astonishment and laughed. "Oh, I'm wiry, you

know, though I don't look strong. I simply loved the life."

"You would! I always think of you in the open air, on horseback. Not like these soft London girls. Your *cousin*, Margot—good Lord!" He was becoming incoherent. "And I never knew—never guessed it. I simply lived at the Heriots' house when I came out of hospital this time last year. Why isn't there a photo of you in that crowd in the drawing-room? Why, I might have hunted you up in France. Anyhow, now I've found you. Thank God! I knew I should."

Clodagh stirred restlessly.

"What became of the horse?" Her voice was abrupt.

"Heaven knows!" He dismissed the topic impatiently. "Tell me this. Do you remember what I said when you wished me good luck?"

"I didn't catch it—the noise of the traffic! Besides, it's so long ago." She was frowning, fully aware of the ardent expression on Strangway's face.

His eyes fell to her hands, lightly clasped in her lap, above her brown feather fan.

"I wish you'd take off those gloves. I want to know—I m—mean," he stammered, "I know you're Miss Laidlaw still, but nowadays every other girl you meet is engaged to some fellow or other."

She was silent.

"You've got to tell me," said Strangway.

"Well, I'm not." She flung the words at him, cornered, annoyed by his persistence. "I don't want to be married. I'm not particularly keen on men."

"Then you *did* wait?" His voice was husky. 'That's what I said: 'Wait for me!' But I hardly hoped—all these years——" He paused, with an effort at self-control. "Tell me something more—your name?"

"My name?" Her eyes widened. "Clodagh Laidlaw."

"Clodagh." He whispered the word. "I never

thought of that. It's like you—cool and musical. Are you always so cold? You didn't look it, when I used to watch you in the Park, nor that last time——"

She broke in:

"Don't you think the joke is getting threadbare? One wishes every one 'good luck,' or at any rate one did then." She tried to smile but the effort failed, for a hand came down over hers, tenderly but with a strength that left her powerless to escape the clasp of the bronzed and muscular fingers.

"Clodagh?" He leaned closer. "When will you marry me?"

For a moment she stared at him in silence; then she found her voice.

"I think you're mad! Why, I don't know you. We've only just met."

"I'm not mad. I'm in earnest. I've loved you for four years. You've been with me day and night. Every leave I've spent in London—except for those few days at home—simply on the off-chance of finding you. Don't you believe me?"

She saw it was useless to fence with him.

"In a way. But it doesn't really count, because——" She paused, finding it a difficult matter to explain. "Don't you see how absurd it all is?" she began again, almost angrily. "You don't really care for *me*, but the ghost of a girl you saw. I know it's partly the times we live in. Men get fancies—I don't wonder. Anything to escape from facts, the deadly facts of war. I can understand that, but it isn't real, and—I *wish* you'd take your hand away!"

He obeyed her, aware of the sudden flicker of temper in her candid eyes.

"All right. Then I shall wait. You say that you don't know me?" He frowned. "I couldn't expect our first encounter to hold the same importance for you. But, anyhow, it won't be my fault if you don't get to

know me now. I'm in town for another week. I shall see you every day."

His voice was perfectly controlled; a faint smile curved his lips. He looked so assured, with his keen face and strong limbs, that the girl, for the first time, felt an odd sense of impotence. She resented his subtle air of possession.

"That's a rash statement, isn't it?" She looked at him disdainfully. "I'm rather busy just now and London is a big place."

Unmoved, he made a suggestion:

"Could you lunch with me to-morrow? With your cousin, of course. I'll get Archdale to make a fourth."

"We're lunching at Ranelagh."

"Then what about Sunday?" He smiled to himself.

"On Sunday," said Clodagh coldly, "Aunt Helen is giving a lunch at the Ritz. For women." She emphasized the word. "You see, it's not quite so simple. I'm engaged all this week. It's time I went back to the dance-room." She rose to her feet with an air of dismissal.

As she moved away she experienced a check. For the trail of leaves that hung from her waist was caught by a splinter of cane protruding from the frame of the chair.

"One minute!" Strangway stooped and tried to disentangle it awkwardly with a single hand. "That won't do!" Impatiently, he slipped his left arm out of the sling.

At the sight of the numbed-looking fingers, white in contrast with the others, called into forbidden service, a wave of pity swept over the girl.

"Oh, no," she cried. "You mustn't—please! I can reach it."

She bent sideways. For a moment the spray of hops brushed his cheek as the two heads met. In the next she was caught in his strong right arm, held against him, his lips on her hair.

"Clodagh?" It was a stifled prayer.

With a sharp cry she escaped, leaving the trail of leaves, snapped asunder by her action, still clinging to the splinter. She faced Strangway, the chair between them.

"So *that's* what you are!" Her voice vibrated, full of passionate resentment.

He did not answer. He looked like a man suddenly roused from a deep sleep, startled, still haunted by his dreams. He seemed to tower above the girl, like—like the statue of Achilles! In the whirlwind of her thoughts her own words came back to her: "He'd swoop down and seize a woman, because he loved her and meant to have her."

Yes, some women. Not Clodagh Laidlaw! She flung back her head and challenged him:

"Do you think I can be taken by force?"

A shiver ran across his shoulders. Under his sunburn his face was white, his mouth set in a straight line. Still, he made no reply. Slowly he drew from his finger a signet ring and held it out.

"It's no good talking. You don't understand. But I didn't mean to—to insult you. All these years I've been yours, as much engaged to you as if you'd worn this ring of mine, and I forgot. I couldn't help it. I've kissed you so often in my dreams. But I'm not going to worry you, or revert to the subject when we meet. At the end of the week, if you don't care, you can just hand me back *this*—— I shall understand, and go away. For a time. Please?"

Mechanically she took the ring extended to her. Again her mind refused to act. When a man apologized it wasn't decent, not fair play to—to humble him further. But could he be humbled? Was her reason playing her tricks? Her reason and Strangway's blue eyes burning down into hers. Hazel eyes couldn't flame like that. A mean advantage, with his height——

She caught herself up. With an effort she broke the

curious spell that held her, nodded and walked to the door. As she opened it, and, faintly, the music from above brought its message of security, she looked back over her shoulder at the tall figure, absorbed and rigid, watching her difficult retreat, and loosed the reins of her defiance :

" But you *won't* see me every day ! I shall take jolly good care of that."

" Won't I ? " said Strangway under his breath.

CHAPTER III

THE premature wave of heat had broken and a breeze stirred the topmost boughs of the high old trees at Ranelagh. Save for the luncheon crowd, few people had arrived yet, and Clodagh—seated beside her aunt, somnolent after a good meal and answering vaguely their host's remarks—was not surprised when Strangway found them. She had fully realized her mistake in telling him of this engagement.

He came up to the little group watching the start of the polo match, shook hands with herself and Mrs. Heriot and took the vacant chair by Margot, the farthest seat in a line from Clodagh's. The latter breathed a sigh of relief.

"Blue?" she heard him say to her cousin. "I always picture you in pink, like a dainty sweet! Not a bad idea for a fancy dress: to go as a fondant? Unless you're afraid of being eaten!"

"Or of melting," said Margot gaily. She glanced at his well-cut uniform. "You would make a fine stick of barley-sugar. Though I don't think we ought to dance together!"

"And never come unstuck?" laughed Strangway. "What a scandal! Not that *I'd* mind." After the slightest pause he added, "But the Albert Hall wouldn't like it, with its Early-Victorian prejudices."

Clodagh listened, holding her breath. Would Margot fall into the trap? She did.

"Oh, you're going to the ball on Wednesday?"

"I'm thinking of it," Strangway replied. "Though I haven't bought a ticket yet."

"Then you won't get one. They're all sold," Margot assured him pertly. "We've had ours for ages past."

"Won't he?" said a voice behind them. "I'll back Strangway to wangle it!"

Sir Ian looked up and laughed, nodding to the intruder, a young lieutenant, by name Borlase, who had been one of the guests at lunch.

"That's right, young 'un. Stick up for me. I'm being very badly snubbed." He resumed his conversation with Margot.

"May I sit here?" asked Borlase and slipped into the seat by Clodagh, taking her consent for granted. "Wonderful chap," he informed her in a confidential undertone. "I've served under him and I know. Always got the best of billets, though he couldn't speak a word of Flemish, and when anything went wrong—which was chronic in those days—the Major used to shout for him. From stealing ducks to soothing the old man in a rage, Strangway would pull it off. Always cheery and bright, you know, but got there in the end."

"A conquering hero," said Clodagh lightly.

Borlase looked slightly injured.

"A jolly good officer! Never known to get the wind up and awfully popular with the men." His voice took on a graver note. "He's been badly wounded twice, you know, and I doubt if he'll get back to the Front this time, with that arm of his. He's had three operations and now they're leaving it alone. Shrapnel, and it's injured the nerves. Yet you'd never guess he was in pain pretty well all the time. He simply bars all reference to it, so don't give me away, will you?"

"Of course not." Clodagh felt a touch of repentance. "I'm sorry to hear it." She glanced across at the stalwart figure, apparently engrossed in Margot's gay chatter. If he suffered he hid it well.

There came the thud of swift hoofs on the ground as the ponies bore down in their direction. Borlase leaned forward eagerly to watch the game; Clodagh could give herself up to her thoughts.

If Margot became an unconscious ally of Strangway's, the plot would thicken. He could easily learn their engagements and she dared not warn her cousin. For Margot was not to be trusted. Her own position in the household forbade an evasion of social duties. Mrs. Heriot would not accept any excuse save that of illness. She liked the two girls to go out together in this age of non-chaperonage.

Clodagh stared in front of her, over the stretch of green turf and the movement of the polo players, to the high trees that fringed the river against a background of blue sky, across which fleecy clouds were driving up with the wind. Strangway's challenge still rang in her ears: "I shall see you every day." It was evident that he had meant it, and it put her on her mettle. She did not pause to analyse what lay beneath her stubborn resistance; she would not admit to a touch of panic. In her dealings with the opposite sex, she had always been cool and level-headed; used to men, as she would have phrased it. To men in the mass, out in France. But this was London, bound by conventions which, albeit relaxed in these days of war, did not permit that personal freedom which Clodagh had enjoyed abroad.

"These tepid London men!" She remembered her scornful verdict in discussing Seaton's behaviour with Sheila. No one could call Sir Ian "tepid." Involuntarily she smiled. According to Borlase, he was a man who looked on obstacles merely as fences to take in his headlong course. A little thrill of excitement ran through her, due to the knowledge that the conflict would need all her strength and skill. He should *not* see her "every day." She was something he couldn't "wangle"!

But she mustn't let Aunt Helen guess. She would

have to act warily. Poor Aunt Helen, so anxious to see her young people " settled in life " ; so conscious of the fact that, if the war went on much longer, there would be no men left to marry ! Facing, too, a diminished income and appalled by her husband's daily warning that the big house in Lowndes Square must follow the fate of so many others already shut up or let.

Clodagh, glancing sideways, could see her aunt's gallant resistance to the drowsy spell of the hour, her pussy-cat face a little puckered around the weak but tyrannical mouth, as though she fought with a fit of yawning. Whilst she dropped her accustomed platitudes into her companion's ears, across his trim, elderly form, she was covertly watching her daughter and Strangway. Clodagh could guess her thoughts. Sir Ian " would do." A much better match than Archdale, dependent on his father.

Mrs. Heriot, meanwhile, decided to make a few inquiries. A year ago Strangway had been but one of the many wounded soldiers enjoying their hospitality and dancing in Margot's train, overlooked in the latter's flirtation with a certain Major Wensleydale—that unfortunate affair ! Why couldn't Edward have discovered that the Major had a wife in Ireland ? A wasted season, Aunt Helen decided. But now Strangway had returned. It was obvious that he admired Margot. She gave a comfortable sigh.

At this moment Sir Ian looked up and his eyes shot across to Clodagh. Aunt Helen intercepted the glance. She stiffened. His careless, smiling face had taken on a new expression, virile and dissatisfied. She felt a furious reaction. Could it be Clodagh after all ? That niece of hers who could not compare with her daughter in beauty and social *flair* ; who refused to accept a good husband like Seaton ; was ungrateful and eager to return to that " unsettling " life of war-work, and yet attracted all the men ? Not decently, with a view to marriage, but full of

this modern craze, liberty and companionship, which only led to restlessness.

As if a man could be a "companion"! Aunt Helen sniffed through her high-arched nose and rose with dignity to her feet.

"I think it's getting a little chilly. Supposing we take a turn or two?" She included her charges in the speech addressed to the elderly host and they responded obediently, aware of an acid note in her voice. "Now we shall see," she said to herself. "Ah, I thought so!"

For Strangway had crossed to speak to Borlase and, as the party split up into pairs, he fell behind by Clodagh's side.

Mrs. Heriot, preceding them, listened deliberately, but the band drowned their conversation. She caught one word: "rock-garden." When they reached the end of the grassy walk she was not surprised to see the two young people pass her, but at that moment some friends came up and monopolized her attention.

She did not divine that Clodagh went reluctantly away from the safety of the crowd, already regretting an impulse of pity that had made her fall in with the man's suggestion. For, as they encountered the incoming throng, she had seen Strangway wince at a sudden collision with a blundering individual who had cannoned into his wounded arm; wince but continue, smiling, to talk of his mother and her hobby:

"So whenever I hear of a rock-garden I try and have a look at it on the chance of spotting a new plant to interest the old lady. But I don't know Ranelagh very well. My club's Hurlingham."

Yes, he was plucky, Clodagh admitted. Three operations? She found herself impulsively offering to act as guide. Now she felt puzzled and annoyed. To be alone with Ian Strangway was the last thing she had planned.

At present he gave her no cause for regret. As they turned their backs on the terrace and struck out across the empty lawns he continued to talk of his home.

"It's a dear old place—you'd like it. On a hill with a view of the valley below, and the village. Right in the heart of the country, seven miles from a station and fourteen from Bristol, our nearest town. There's decent shooting, and hunting—of sorts! At least there was before the war. My mother's running things at present. It's been rather hard on her, as my father died just after I left for the Front and I am the only child. That's why I'm off home next week—my sick leave's been extended." His face lit up. "I shall get some riding. It's what I want—exercise! London's no place for a healthy man. I hope to get back to France too. I don't think the war will last much longer and I must be in at the finish."

"You've seen it through?"

Strangway nodded.

"Pretty well. But I shan't stay in the army. Cavalry officers won't be wanted. At least that's my opinion. We haven't had much luck! Besides, now my father's gone, I'm needed at Keyn Magna. Some one must run the place."

"Your mother will be glad," said Clodagh.

"In a way. She's very capable." He smiled as they crossed the bridge, apparently at his own thoughts. "You mightn't think so to look at her; she only comes up to my elbow. But she ruled the governor all right! Of course"—he stared straight ahead—"when I marry she won't live at the Manor. I don't believe in divided authority."

"That always seems so hard to me," Clodagh remarked in a cool voice. "To be dispossessed by the children and start again in a new place."

"Oh, it wouldn't be new," said Strangway quickly. "Most of the village goes with the Manor and there's a nice house there where one of my mother's cousins lives. As a matter of fact, she's a pensioner of the old man's. He was good to my mother's people. Good to every one, dear old chap!" He paused and added gently, "Are your parents alive?"

"No, both dead. I'm a pensioner too!"

She spoke carelessly but Strangway was not deceived

"And you don't like it?"

She looked up quickly, startled by his intuition.

"Not altogether. I'd sooner be independent. hoped to earn my own living. By my voice. But I los it through an illness. Still, I have a very good time every one's very kind to me. My uncle's an old dear Only, that diphtheria in France upset all my plans fo the future."

"Hard luck! Still, you've done your bit." Ther was genuine sympathy in the words. "I should thin you find London life pretty flat after the other?"

"It's deadly! I can't settle down. Aunt Helen say it's the curse of the age: 'All you girls so *unsettled*!' She parodied Mrs. Heriot's voice as they moved up th sloping lawn dedicated to Pastoral Plays. "Of cours Margot's the exception. Sometimes, I envy her."

"Well, you needn't!" His eyes shone. For a secon he laid a hand on her arm. "Don't you *know* what yo are?"

She recoiled, as much from his glance as his touc At once his hand fell to his side.

"Hullo! Here's the rock-garden. It reminds m rather of the Zoo. The terraces—without the lions!"

"Luckily." Clodagh smiled. She was relieved b his change of manner. "You mustn't be critical—it new. It's going to be lovely by and by."

"Think so? Too patently artificial for me." H stared up at the cliff-like construction with its roc heaped symmetrically and its plants in patches, arrange with an eye to both colour and design. "You should s our garden at home. It's *real*. There's an arbutus-wal on the ridge with little spaces cut in it through which yo get a view of the valley. Beneath is the rock-garden, a wild, above a brook." He paused. "That's a ne plant, isn't it?" He pointed to a specimen covered wi

ittle yellow bells, then glanced quickly right and left. ' No one about. Hurrah ! I'm going to sneak a bit of his and send it home to the mater."

" Oh, you mustn't ! " Clodagh was taken aback. She looked nervously around them. Not a soul was visible on the other side of the lake, and they had the narrow path to themselves.

" Why not ? I won't injure the plant. I want it." He hunted for his penknife.

" That's no reason." The words slipped out thoughtlessly.

He gave her a stubborn glance.

" The very best. I generally get what I want—in the end." He stooped to his task. " You might keep a look-out in case a gardener pops up." He removed a small section of the plant, placed it in his tunic pocket, straightened his back and smiled at the girl. " Now you're a party to the act. We've got a deadly secret between us."

But Clodagh refused to weaken. She was annoyed by his speech and its deliberate significance.

" It's stealing." She faced him boldly.

" Commandeering," Strangway amended. " In a good cause. They won't miss it."

They moved forward in silence. The path, like a thread between rocks and water, forced them together against the girl's will. She quickened her pace, relieved when they came to some stepping-stones fording a little creek and she had an excuse to pass him. Alone, she forged ahead.

" I believe you're frightened," said Strangway behind her.

She turned her head and gave him a glance of cool and measured indifference. He added quickly :

" No one saw us. I wish you'd stop, a minute ? I can't talk to the back of your head."

Clodagh paused unwillingly.

"You don't like my taking that plant?" His blu eyes searched her face. "Honestly? . . . Then, bac it goes!" Before she could check him he had seized label in the earth by his elbow, dug a hole and clumsil forced the roots into the soil. "All among the little re fellows! Won't the gardener be surprised? A freak c Nature." His eyes narrowed. "Satisfied?"

"Yes." She smiled. The victory had been un expected. The feminine side of her rejoiced. He hadn' had his way this time!

Strangway looked down at his earthy fingers and bac into the girl's face.

"There's only one remedy for this." He drew out hi handkerchief. "If you'd hold that for a second——?" He stooped and rinsed his hand in the lake. "This i where you come in. First aid!" He extended it, drippin

She was cornered. She could not refuse such a triflin service although she guessed that it was a punishmen that Strangway was scoring, after all.

"Oh, not in your gloves," he remonstrated as sh doubled the linen handkerchief, plain but of the fine texture. "You'll spoil them. What a nuisance I am! A faint smile flickered and vanished on the well-cut bu obstinate mouth.

She pulled off her gloves impatiently and, in the mo stolid and business-like fashion, wiped the long su burnt fingers. She could see a band of white skin whe the signet ring had once lain and it evoked disturbi thoughts. At the end of the week she would return it she registered her vow anew. But what a powerful han it was, with the well-turned wrist that looked like ste She shot a nervous glance at his face and regretted th impulse. For a moment she felt her heart beat quick and a curious sense of distress. Then she summoned h cooler reason.

"There!" She placed the handkerchief in his pal "Now you won't catch cold!" There was irony in h

smile. "We must get back to the ground. It must be quite time for tea."

"Thank you." His voice was muffled.

In silence they retraced their steps. From over the hedge on their right came the welcome sound of voices, people returning from tennis. Strangway broke the spell that held them:

"The Heriots are dining with me on Tuesday. Your only night free, so Margot told me."

"It's not free. She must have forgotten." Clodagh smiled triumphantly.

"Oh, you mean Archdale's little show?" Sir Ian replied, unmoved. "We've agreed to combine forces. I'm asking a couple of other people and then we can dance afterwards. At Claridge's, your cousin decided."

"I should think the right person to decide was Aunt Helen," Clodagh said stiffly.

"Not really?" His eyes twinkled. "I imagined in a case like this that Margot held the casting vote. Anyhow Arch is agreeable."

He would be, thought Clodagh. It was evident which of the hosts would pay. Archdale was careful of his money.

"Oh, *Arch*!" She shrugged her shoulders.

"Poor old Arch." Strangway laughed. "Must make it cheery for him, you know. A dull life at the War Office!"

Clodagh refused to smile. She was counting the days ahead. If Strangway went to the ball on Wednesday there was only to-morrow—she pulled herself up, remembering that she had told him of their engagement at the Ritz—and Monday and Thursday free without a pre-arranged meeting. She would lay a trap for him in return.

"Life's a rush just now, isn't it?" she said demurely. "I'm quite looking forward to a day of idleness in the country." She caught his swift, sidelong glance and added, "On Thursday. A real laze."

He accepted the unspoken challenge.

"Ah, but I know where you live now! It's not like that morning when I waited at the corner of Lowndes Square. I was terrified in case you would ride to the Park by some other route."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"And trains are open to all," he suggested.

The spirit of the game seized her.

"Will you have a bet that we don't meet?"

"Rather! I'll bet you—what shall it be? A string of pearls to a crooked sixpence. Have you got one?" he asked. Clodagh nodded. "All right. But let's get it straight. If I *win* you get the pearls; if I *lose* you have to give me—a mascot!"

"Oh, you'd have one in any case." Her face was brimming over with mischief. She had missed his inversion of the wager.

"Should I?" He was puzzled.

"Well, I suppose it *is* a mascot? Anyhow an old friend. What you lent me on Friday night."

"My ring?" His fair brows came together. He opened his lips to retort, then closed them. Frowning he stalked by her side, into the wide, green space where the tea-tables were closely ranged, surrounded already by chattering groups. "There's Mrs. Heriot." He steered a straight course towards the party, said a word to Margot, raised his hat and vanished in the crowd beyond.

"What's the matter with Ian?" asked Margot.

"Matter?" Clodagh's brows went up. "Because he left us? Oh, I think he's got some friends here for tea."

Margot smiled.

"Well, he seemed in a hurry." She caught her mother's inquisitive glance. "Oh, mum, I forgot to tell you Arch has altered the plans on Tuesday. He wants us to dine at Claridge's and dance afterwards. Sir Ian's coming. Much nicer, isn't it?" She slipped a hand through her mother's arm. "He's bringing an old flame of yours. Now, aren't you curious?"

"You silly child!" Mrs. Heriot patted the caressing fingers, whilst her thoughts moved quickly. Perhaps, after all, it had been Clodagh's idea to escape to the rock-garden? They didn't seem to have enjoyed it. But you never could tell with young men. They were so casual nowadays. Unsettled—that dreadful war! Brave, of course, but *how* spoilt. . . . He had certainly seemed to like Margot in his old visits to the house. A pity she had been talked about in connection with Wensleydale. All Edward's negligence, too. . . . She became conscious of her silence. "Claridge's, did you say, darling? You'd better remind me on the night. Where are we lunching on Thursday? You know I never can remember."

"With Sir Ian, at the Carlton."

Peaceful contentment overspread the pussy-cat face.

"Yes, of course. Ah, here comes tea."

Mrs. Heriot proceeded to pour it out. She had missed Clodagh's quick glance at Margot and her smile, immediately suppressed.

No wonder, thought the girl, that Strangway had looked surprised when he heard of the "day in the country." It must have been settled at the dance, between himself and Margot.

"I'm glad," she decided. "It serves him right. Any other man would take the hint. Instead of riding for a fall!"

Her plans were clear in her mind. She would plead the excuse of a bad headache at the last moment, get out of the lunch and go down to Aunt Addy in her little house at Richmond. She could stay for tea and dinner, fix it all up by telephone and without a word to Margot.

This decided, she turned to Borlase and amazed that young man by admitting that Strangway "improved on acquaintance."

For the rest of the afternoon she was the life and soul of the party.

Aunt Helen watched her and wondered.

CHAPTER IV

"THE last hook. Now you can wriggle out!" said Margot.

Clodagh obeyed. The fancy dress slipped from her slim figure and she stretched herself luxuriously.

"Ough! I'm tired. Aren't you?"

"Not a bit!" Margot laughed. "A cheery evening I enjoyed it. Such gorgeous frocks! They say there's no money about, but it didn't look like it to-night. Wish I had some! Oh, I forgot—I've something lovely to tell you. Borlase let me into the secret. Sir Ian *is* 'Strang way's Sweets'!" Her pretty face was full of mischief but her eyes were studying Clodagh shrewdly under their long, fair lashes. "You *knew*?"

"Yes." Clodagh proceeded to shake out her dress.

"Well, you might have told me." Margot pouted. "I'd no idea, beyond the joke, and at Ranelagh I suggested he should go to the ball to-night as a stick of barley-sugar!"

"You didn't! Still it's all right. He wouldn't mind."

"He wouldn't *show* that he minded," said Margot.

"Oh, he's not like that." To her own surprise, Clodagh resented the imputation. "He speaks of it quite openly. In fact, he's proud of the way his father built up the concern. It's a company, a huge affair. After all nowadays"—she shrugged her shoulders—"who cares?"

"Hullo!" Her cousin was on the alert. "Does that mean you're going to marry him?"

"For his money?" scoffed Clodagh.

"Well, why not?" Margot persisted. "Jolly useful in these times. You'll be a little fool if you don't! He's haunted you since the Moleworths' dance—though mother fondly believes that I'm the principal attraction!" She laughed and added flippantly, "*I'd* take him, sweets and all!"

"I dare say you would." Clodagh turned and began to unloosen her dark hair. She was surprised at the sudden annoyance that seized her at the thought of being supplanted by Margot. "Do," she suggested carelessly, "it's a fair field. Go in and win!"

"Take him on the rebound," laughed Margot. "I'll think of it." She caught up her dress, unfastened earlier, swung it over her arm and moved to the door. On the threshold she paused. "I suppose that's how he wangled his title?"

Clodagh was busily brushing her hair.

"Probably. I didn't ask him! You off? Good night." She waved the hair-brush.

"Sweet dreams!" mocked Margot. "Topped by a giant wedding-cake! He'll be able to commandeer the sugar."

The door closed on her mischievous laugh.

Somewhere outside a clock chimed three. Obeying a sudden impulse, Clodagh crossed to the window and, lifting the blind, peered out at the night. Already in the dark sky was a pale, luminous suggestion heralding the approach of dawn. The silence held a note of suspense and the hour was full of melancholy. It touched a sympathetic chord in the girl. She was tired and overwrought, conscious of endless suspicion on the part of her cousin and her aunt, of being alone and unwanted. A lump rose in her throat. The future seemed as black as the night and without the promise that Nature held over the rim of the horizon.

What was to become of her? By education she was

unfitted for the competition of feminine labour, rendered acute by war conditions. Already the market was overstocked. The only knowledge she possessed was of music. Now her voice had failed her, and with it had vanished her castles in Spain. She clenched her hands and choked back a sob.

Across the weakness of her mood, there flashed a sudden picture of strength, the virile form of Ian Strangway. For a moment she yielded to temptation. As his wife, she would be safe, no longer an object of charity; seeing new interests open out, mistress of the fine old Manor, with the outdoor life that she loved, riding, hunting—a rich woman!

The phrase brought her to her senses. To marry a man for his money? Never! It was to sell her honour. She turned away from the window, plaited her hair and got into bed.

The touch of the cool sheets was refreshing, yet sleep eluded her. Staring out through the darkness, she was haunted by the man's face. The curious thought came to her that, had Strangway been poor and less determined in his pursuit, she might have yielded. She did not realize that the strength of her own character demanded some weakness in those she loved. Both Sheila Logue and her Aunt Addy possessed a soft streak of dependence. Strangway was self-sufficient. Some instinct warned her that the type could have its moments of tyranny; love would mean absolute possession, a menace to her independence. Yet a weakling like Seaton disgusted Clodagh. She would have ruled him—and despised him! She could not despise Strangway. In the depths of her heart she respected him, though she would not admit the fact.

He had kept his word. Each day, since the Molesworths' dance, they had met. He had lunched alone at the Ritz on Sunday and joined their party in the lounge. At the big Charity Bazaar, where Clodagh and Margot were selling on Monday, he had strolled up to their

provision stall with a welcome offering of butter, fresh from his country home. It had paved the way to his enrolment as an industrious helper. On Tuesday, they had dined with him, Archdale ostensibly the host, and to-night he had been at the Albert Hall ball, notwithstanding the dearth of tickets.

Borlase had emphasized the point. "I told you he'd work it somehow, buy some other fellow off! I nearly succumbed myself when he offered me a tenner. He always gets his own way."

Did he? Clodagh again felt that phantom of superstitious fear. But she was too clever to avoid him; she treated him like a casual friend. In the crush, he had her to himself, for parties became dislocated. He took her at last to a friend's box from which they gazed down on the brilliant scene. Always, in his conversations, he brought the topic round to himself, his country life, and his future schemes, without conceit but confident in his own power and material prospects. There was nothing that he hid from her; he was teaching her to know him.

She remembered his candid speech on the origin of his fortune. He had called himself laughingly, a "Baronet of Industry." She could see him now, his eyes shining, when he alluded to his father: "You don't know what he's done for Bristol. Genuine philanthropy, of the sort that means endless trouble, not merely signing a big cheque. He looked into every detail himself; his factories, the health of his workers, play-grounds, convalescent homes. Oh, he deserved his title all right! I'm the one who has profited without any claim to the honour. But I mean to carry on, as well as I can, along his lines. My uncle's the Managing Director. I've done nothing yet because of the war. Still, I hold the bulk of the shares and I can do pretty well as I choose." His jaw had set, though his lips were smiling. "And I shall, when I get my feet in the stirrups."

The only point on which he had shown the slightest reticence had been concerning his widowed mother. He had tried, somewhat lamely, to describe her. "She's a very stay-at-home person. Cousin Tibby calls her 'house-proud'! A wonderful manager, keen on the village, church matters, and so forth. Never goes into society. I can't get her up to town. She came once when I was on leave, but only stayed two days. The old dad loved company, but he gave in to the mater. Of course he knew a lot of people, but the mater wouldn't entertain. Beyond leaving cards, though they're very pleasant to me out hunting, the neighbours rarely come to the house. I hope to change all that. When I marry, there must be friends for my wife."

"When," not "if." He was always so sure! Clodagh tossed restlessly in the narrow bed as the light stole in between the chinks of the curtains. She tried to revive her old spirit of mischief. To-morrow was the final test. To-morrow? To-day! In desperation, she buried her head in the pillow, trying to still her busy brain and gain a few hours of sleep. She drove her thoughts back to France, reviving memories of work and those happy hours of independence. Work? The cure for her restlessness. Her last drowsy inspiration was to seek a place as a lady-chauffeur. Failing that, to drive a taxi!

In her dreams the notion persisted. She was driving Strangway across country, over torn roads full of shell-holes, the distant sound of the guns in her ears. She was filled with a wild exhilaration; she could hear him shouting: "Speed her up! I must be in at the finish," as the car rocked over the ground. Now they were flying through the air, and Margot was with them, mocking Strangway, throwing lumps of barley-sugar. . . .

Suddenly, with a crash, she awoke—to find the sunshine pouring in across her bed and to see the housemaid pulling up the second blind.

Unrefreshed, she went down to breakfast. A dull pain

throbbed in her temples. Even Margot noticed her pallor and the dark circles round her eyes.

"Well, you *do* look a rag this morning!" was the form her sympathy took.

Mrs. Heriot counselled aspirin and a quiet rest before she dressed for the lunch with Strangway.

"You'd better not come out shopping but meet us at the Carlton. In the palm-room, at half-past one. Don't be late. You can take a taxi."

Clodagh inwardly rejoiced. The Fates were working on her behalf.

As soon as the coast was clear, she stole downstairs to the telephone and left a message for Sir Ian of polite regret and apology. Next she got through to Richmond.

Aunt Addy's soft voice greeted her:

"Is that you, Clodagh? . . . Of course, dear child. Come when you like and stay to dinner. I shall be in all the afternoon and we'll have a nice long chat."

Nothing occurred to upset her plans. The sun was still high in the heavens when she lifted the latch of Miss Desmond's gate and made her way up the paved path to the little house tucked in between its more important neighbours on the border of Richmond Green.

She was shown into the drawing-room. A sense of peace enfolded her as she looked round the cool grey walls, with their few but distinctive water-colours. She felt happy and at home in the somewhat austere atmosphere of the little old maid's cherished belongings. Aunt Addy had never succumbed to the modern craze of "collecting." There was no confusion of "wonderful bargains!" The sparse furniture was good, arranged with taste, the fine grain of the wood polished scrupulously and unburdened by ornaments. On the stained floor were some faded rugs, the original colour mellowed by age, and books lay about in plenty, many of them in tooled leather that marked them as old friends. The key-note of the room was refinement, not studied but natural. Aunt Helen would have called

the house "shabby and out of date," blind to its simple artistry.

"It's real," thought Clodagh, "with no attempt at fashion or luxury, a room to live in—not for show. I'd sooner have this than Lowndes Square, with all its costly decorations."

"Well, my dear?" The door had opened to admit a faded little lady, grey-haired with mild blue eyes, lit now with a warm welcome. "This *is* nice!" She kissed her niece. "I was drying Tuppenny—it's the day for his bath—and I had to get out of my wet apron. Would you like to stay here or come into the garden?"

"Oh, the garden!" Clodagh tucked an arm through hers and together they went downstairs. "But what about Tuppenny?"

"He can sit on a chair in the sun. One minute——" She disappeared and returned with a Yorkshire terrier muffled in a bath towel.

"Let me have him? You darling!" cried Clodagh as the little dog tried to lick her face. "You always remember me!"

"He knows his friends," said his mistress proudly.

They settled themselves in the little green space, with its high walls, its single tree, and its border bright with geraniums.

"They've just been put in," said Aunt Addy. "An extravagance on my part, but I spend so much time out here I'd sooner have plants than a new frock. So I've had my old one done up again. Do you like it?" she asked simply.

"I do. Grey always suits you." Clodagh was on her knees, giving the little dog a last rub with the towel. "There!" She placed him on a chair and curled up herself at her aunt's feet. "Now, he'll dry in the sun and we can talk. I have such a lot to tell you."

"Well, take your time," Aunt Addy warned her. "I wish you didn't look so tired."

"Oh, that's nothing! I was dancing all night and afterwards I couldn't sleep. I was thinking——" She broke off to glance at the gentle face above her. "I've got a splendid new idea. To take up driving as a profession. I understand all about cars, so why not go out as a lady-chauffeur?" She felt Aunt Addy's instinctive recoil. "You don't like it?" Her face fell.

"I don't think your parents would have consented," Aunt Addy said gravely.

"I can't help that." The girl was suddenly impatient. "I don't really see that it matters. They never did very much for me and they left me dependent on other people. Oh, it's no good, Aunt Addy, thinking always of the dead. I'm alive, and young. Surely that counts? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I've got to *act*. I can't go on being supported any longer. If Mother had left me a proper income, I might feel bound by her prejudices. But, honestly, she didn't care. I was always too like Father."

"She did care," Miss Desmond protested. "But it was very difficult. You were too young to understand. She gave you a very good education, and——"

Clodagh interrupted the speech.

"Good? Why, she simply moved me about from one school to another. I never learnt anything! I hadn't a chance after Father left us. Except music when we lived in Paris, and afterwards at Lowndes Square. You know how we always stayed in hotels and wandered on from place to place? So long as I was nicely dressed and pleasant to Mother's crowd of friends, that was all she cared about. As to love, why, she never came near me when I was so ill in that school at Auteuil. She simply wrote letters from Monte Carlo and left it all to Madame. She didn't really want me with her. I reminded her too much of Father, and of course she *hated* him!"

A silence fell on the sunny garden. Clodagh, suddenly penitent, laid a hand on her aunt's knee.

"You're vexed with me?"

"No, I'm not vexed. I'm thinking whether I ought to tell you something that you don't know, that no one knows except myself. I can't have you misjudging your mother." The lines deepened round her eyes. "You didn't understand her, dear. If she seemed cold to you it was because she didn't dare—she always repressed her feelings—oh, it's so difficult to explain! The truth was she was broken-hearted. She only loved one person to the end of her life and that was your father. The greatest mistake she ever made was in divorcing him."

Clodagh let fall an amazed:

"Loved him?"

Miss Desmond nodded solemnly.

"She ought to have forgiven him, for her own sake as well as his. Mind you, I'm not excusing your father. He deserved his punishment. He had it in full too. With that Winterton woman!" She sniffed. "His second marriage was most unhappy and all the time he loved your mother. And she loved him! Yes, I'm going to tell you. It must be a secret between us, but I feel I can trust you, Clodagh. Promise?"

"I promise," said the girl.

"Well, you know how she sent for me to nurse her when she was taken ill? We tried to hide the danger from her, but she guessed and she made me write to your father. I resisted her wish for a time, but the doctor said that she must be kept quiet, so, in the end, I gave way. He came as quickly as he could." Her eyes filled at the memory of that tragic reunion. "They were together all the last hours, and—she died in his arms."

The girl gave a stifled exclamation. Through a mist, the old eyes, watching her, could see the swift emotions pass over the vivid young face. Astonishment, pained speculation, and, finally, impulsive judgment.

"Then, all those years," Clodagh pronounced, "she

might have been happy. Father too! If it hadn't been for her pride."

"Not pride alone." Aunt Addy was startled. Her loyalty rose in arms. "She did it through a sense of duty. She thought he ought to marry—that other."

"Duty!" Clodagh's lips curled. "How I hate the word! It's a trap. Nine times out of ten, it means doing hurtful things from a sense of self-righteousness. If mother had only used her reason, instead of second-hand conventions, she would have realized that father didn't *want* to marry—that it was all a hopeless mistake! As it was, she left him no escape. So she ruined three lives, including her own, through that Early-Victorian bugbear, 'duty.'"

Aunt Addy looked distressed. The point of view was new to her and warred with her settled creed of life. For this child of another generation had discarded the false sentiment so dear to her own era, and its passion for punishment. Where Aunt Addy was swayed by her heart, Clodagh relied on her reason. The older woman resented the fact. How hard they were, these young people! She wished now she had preserved the secret jealously guarded for years.

"But, don't you see," she began.

"See?" Clodagh caught her up. "Of course I do! I think it's *awful*. All that waste of happiness. And Father——" Her eyes were full of trouble. "How did Father take it?" she asked.

"He was utterly broken, but he deserved it. Your mother didn't." The little old lady spoke severely. "I shouldn't have told you, Clodagh—I never even told Helen—but I thought you would understand and pity your poor mother."

"I do! Only it's difficult to take it all in at once. I'm frightfully sorry, but of course I was fond of Father too. I was so happy before he left us; then everything went wrong. But I couldn't guess what you've just

told me. It's upset my ideas. So you think "—her dark brows came together—" that Mother all the time was pretending, not really enjoying life ? "

" I know it." Aunt Addy wiped her eyes. " It was her pride kept her up. She threw herself into society so that the world shouldn't guess."

" Poor Mother ! "

The words came out with a ring of sincerity that lifted the burden of doubt weighing on the other's spirit. Her frail arms went round the girl.

" Dear Aunt Addy ! " Clodagh hugged her. " I think you were a brick to help them. It couldn't have been easy for you."

" It wasn't, but I'm thankful now. She died in peace." Miss Desmond wiped her eyes and composed herself. " But it makes me sometimes anxious, darling, for you. You're very like your father. Impulsive and headstrong." Her voice was so gentle that it took the sting from the words. " That's why I'm always warning you to think twice before you act."

" And ' count twenty,' " Clodagh suggested, an impenitent twinkle in her eyes. " Well, I'll promise you one thing : when I marry I'll never divorce my husband. An easy matter because I don't intend to have one ! I'm going to strike out a line for myself. The trouble is at present, to find it ? " Emboldened by Miss Desmond's smile, she went on playfully, " If I start a cab at Richmond, will you promise to employ me ? And may I have Tuppenny on the box ? On a piece of sacking—looking pensive."

" You're a naughty child," said Aunt Addy. She bent to pick up the little dog, who, hearing his name, had deserted his post and was now begging for attention. " But I'm not sorry that I told you. You will understand your poor mother better. And she thought you would be provided for under your father's will. She was very troubled about your future. As you know, he died

suddenly, before he had time to sign a new one and everything went to his widow."

"Oh, was that it?" Clodagh's face cleared. "Aunt Helen never told me."

"She didn't know; not about that last meeting. She was not so fond of your mother as I was and it seemed sacred to me. But you are their child. It's different." She paused and glanced across the lawn. "Now, let us talk of something else. Here comes Rivers with the tea."

"Tea-time?" Clodagh sprang up. "If I'm going to stay to dinner I ought to send a message home. May I use the telephone?"

"But don't they know that you're here?" The little old lady looked surprised. "Of course, my dear. Tell them at once. They'll be wondering where you are." To herself, she added, "They don't seem to look after the child very well. But Helen's so wrapped up in Margot. I wish I could have her to live with me? Perhaps I can when the war is over and I get my old dividends again." She sighed, looking forward to that Peace which when it came was to prove the most pitiful disillusion to people with slender incomes; a fact mercifully concealed by the harsh contrast of the struggle.

"Peace!" She repeated the word softly and sent up a silent prayer for the souls of those who had died to ensure it.

CHAPTER V

"NOW, where did I put my knitting?" Aunt Addy gazed round the room vaguely from her favourite chair facing Clodagh who was curled up on the sofa. She added inconsequently, "You look all the better for your dinner. You're far too thin, my child."

"I'm in love!" The girl mischievously watched the effect of this announcement. Miss Desmond forgot her work, her eyes full of unspoken questions. "In love with Tuppenny," Clodagh concluded. She lifted him up on to her knee and the smile faded from her lips. Impulsively she voiced her thoughts: "Do you think I ought to get married, Aunt Addy?"

"What a question!" The little old maid was taken aback. "It all depends——" She broke off, a faint colour in her cheeks.

"Exactly!" Clodagh laughed. "*You* didn't, so why should I? And I know you had heaps of admirers, and turned them down ruthlessly." She yielded to curiosity. "Have you ever regretted it?" she asked.

"Sometimes," Miss Desmond admitted bravely. "Not a husband, but—well, I think I should have liked a child. A little child." Her eyes were wistful.

"But they don't remain little," mused Clodagh. "That's the trouble! They grow up and develop a will of their own. Parents resent this. Then it's a fight between them."

"You mustn't exaggerate," said her aunt. "You

must remember nowadays it's not easy for the parents. Young people are so independent."

Clodagh sat bolt upright.

"If I had a child, I should *want* it to be independent. I should hate it to feel bound down to a blind and unreasoning obedience just because I was its mother." She frowned, warming to her subject. "I'd get rid of all that ancient pretence of a child being the 'gift of Heaven.' If it's anything, it's a *loan*. Of course it's all right to control its actions whilst its body is helpless and before its brain has developed. But afterwards it should think things out, and learn by experience. There's a lot too much talk about ownership in the way people bring up children. No parents have the right to decide on a son's profession or to insist upon marriage for a girl. They ought to be free to choose for themselves. Their lives are their own. Otherwise, it's a form of slavery."

Aunt Addy looked indignant. It was an attack on her own generation.

"You seem to forget the parents' trials? All the anxiety and expense and the fact that they brought it into the world, that the child owes its very existence to them. They surely expect *some* gratitude?"

"For its birth? Why?" Clodagh was unconvinced. "If I thrust a meal down a poor man's throat whether he wanted it or not, I shouldn't expect him to be 'grateful'! After all, it's a process of Nature. But Nature herself is more consistent. When the young birds have learnt to fly, the parents turn them out of the nest. They don't tie up their wings with cotton! It's only humans who do this. And then cry when the cotton breaks. What's that?" She paused to listen.

From below came the sound of a bell, ringing persistently.

"The telephone!" Miss Desmond rose and went out, to the head of the stairs. "It's all right. Rivers has gone."

The elderly maid came up with the message.

"They've rung up from Lowndes Square, m'm, to say they're sending the car for Miss Laidlaw at half-past nine. And she's not to keep it waiting, please."

"Is Mrs. Heriot there?" asked her mistress.

"No, m'm, it sounded like the butler speaking. They've rung off now." Rivers withdrew and closed the door with a firmness suggesting a desire for no further interruptions to threaten the peace of the evening hour.

"Very thoughtful of your aunt," said her sister. "I didn't like the idea myself of your returning by train alone."

Clodagh was inwardly surprised. Her war-work abroad had procured her a certain emancipation, where social conventions were not involved. She guessed the reason for this favour. Aunt Helen knew the little old lady's prejudices; she wished to show how well she looked after their orphaned niece. But the girl was loyal. All she remarked was:

"I shall have a nice drive. I love spinning through the dark! By the way, I've found your knitting. It was under the sofa cushion." She handed it over to the owner and watched her settle down peacefully to her accustomed task.

Click, click, went the bone needles.

"Shall I ever come to that?" thought Clodagh. "Old, wrinkled, alone with a dog—and happy! No, I can't see it."

The gentle voice broke across her reflections.

"What were we talking about, dear?"

"I forget." Their former subject seemed distasteful to the girl. It was impossible to bridge the gulf that lay between age and youth, deepened by the convulsions of war, without the risk of wounding the former. "About Tuppenny, I think. Does he still wage battle on the cats when they take a fancy to the garden?"

"Yes, but he's getting rather rheumatic; not so

young as he used to be. Like his mistress!" Aunt Addy nodded. "Still, we've much to be thankful for." She turned her knitting and smiled at her niece. "Now, tell me all your gay news. I read a description of the ball for the Red Cross at the Albert Hall. It must have been a wonderful sight! What did you and Margot wear?"

But the *tête-à-tête* was doomed. The maid reappeared, her face rigid.

"Miss Andrews to see you, m'm. I've asked her into the dining-room."

"Oh dear, how tiresome!" Miss Desmond sighed but rose to her feet. "I shall have to go—it's about the Belgians. Poor things, they're so helpless, can't even do their own dusting! But she *might* have called another evening. Can you amuse yourself, my dear, for a few minutes? I shan't be long."

"Of course. But why not see her here?"

"Oh, no. She'd stay for *hours* then!" Aunt Addy sounded tragic. "So kind, but she can't take a hint."

Clodagh laughed as the door closed. She could picture the visitor evading Miss Desmond's pathetic attempts to dislodge her. Her thoughts wandered from the familiar problem of the Belgians to her own desire for active work. Her allowance was due; she would treat herself to some lessons at a motor-school, rub up her knowledge and get in touch with the newest cars. Then advertise for a situation. It should be far away from town. This might reduce Aunt Helen's objections. An impulsive idea came to the girl. Why not ask Strangway to help her by making a few inquiries among his friends round Bristol? But would he approve of the scheme?

Suddenly, with an odd sensation of blankness, she realized that she wouldn't see him again now before he left London. He was off to-morrow for Keyn Magna. By an early train; so he had told her. The week of

probation was expiring. She had won the bet—and lost a friend.

Could Strangway be a friend? She felt a curious pang of regret. How absurd! She wouldn't miss him. Yet she was conscious that he had altered imperceptibly her standard of values. Other men seemed dwarfed beside him, lacking in vitality. It was not only his physical strength which set him apart from the gay crowd that came and went at the Heriots' house, but a certain fine simplicity. Strangway never stooped to pretence. In many ways he approached dangerously to the early ideal of manhood that Clodagh had built up for herself. She realized that, without him, life would be a little flat. The game of eluding him was over. Farewell to "Hector tamer of horses," all that girlhood—stupidity! She gave herself a little shake. Was she falling into line with Margot, who was always wrapped up in the latest flirtation? But why couldn't the man be contented with an honest, open friendship? They could have been so happy together!

Her reason dismissed this hypothesis. He would never submit to a compromise. It would have to be a clean break, once she had given back the ring. She started. How could she give it back? Was this part of his scheme? To leave it with her and try what absence would achieve?

"He shall not," she decided. "I'll post it to-morrow. To his home. He'll understand."

And again there came that blank sensation of finality and loneliness. She had beaten him, but she missed the old exultation of victory. She felt tired and exasperated.

"Something wrong with my liver," she told Tuppenny confidentially. "Too much lobster salad last night. *You* understand!"

The little dog yawned, showing the curled pink tongue between his almost toothless gums and the muzzle, greyed by age.

Old, old—like Aunt Addy.

"I shall come to it," thought Clodagh forlornly. "Wrinkles and knitting, an ancient pet! But I can't imagine I shall enjoy it. I shall go for the Andrews clan with a poker!"

Restless, she commenced a tour round the room, examining the pictures and odd pieces of precious china. She came to a tiny cabinet and pulled out the upper drawer. It was filled with carved counters, little fish in mother-of-pearl. They awakened memories of childhood. How she had loved to play with them! In the drawer below was a box holding ivory spillikins, one of the frail swords snapped.

It recalled an early incident, the tragedy of a broken doll whose glass eyes had disappeared into the void of its wax head. Colonel Laidlaw had found his small daughter hugging the victim and bathed in tears. With infinite patience he had succeeded in repairing the disaster; a whole afternoon's labour.

Yet that was the man, Clodagh thought, who had broken his wife's heart.

Who could understand men, their sudden desires, their strength and weakness, their simplicity and their guile?

Simplicity? She thought of Strangway, and his impulsive conduct. Dimly she saw that his sex was eternally pursuing, not the woman herself but an ideal. No woman, once captured, satisfied a man's ideal. Women, on the other hand, persisted in the mystery that had cast a glamour over the man. They invested him with qualities and attributes which he did not possess, wilfully blind and satisfied to own the creature of their fancies. It was the result, Clodagh thought, of the past feminine education, when ignorance posed as virtue, and platitudes took the place of logic. In the school-room a husband was "always faithful"; marriage was a "holy state"; children, a part of the mystery—"gifts of God"

—a supreme blessing, to be kept in a state of ignorance too, until experience opened their eyes. Until, in fact, they came a cropper!

Humbug and want of courage; so Clodagh summed it up. The new world after the war must be refashioned. Youth must do it. With the broken spillikin in her hand, she began ardently to plan.

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"You mustn't catch cold." Aunt Addy buttoned the coat under Clodagh's chin. "Perhaps you could have the car shut?" She peered out through the darkness, for there was no moon to-night. "I'll come down and see you off."

"No, you're not to! Wave from the window." The girl kissed her. "I shall run over and see you again before long."

"*Any* time," purred Aunt Addy. "Remember to give my love to them all. And don't worry about the future. Everything will come right."

Clodagh smiled as she went downstairs. Another dear old platitude! No wonder women had learnt to depend on men to get them out of their muddles. Dependence was a "womanly virtue," its antithesis the modern crime.

Absorbed in these speculations, she crossed to the gate, turned to wave to the indistinct figure at the window, outlined against the lamplight, and, finally, stepped up into the car. The chauffeur bent to spread the rug over her knees as she settled herself sedately in Aunt Helen's corner. Something in his action arrested the girl's attention; the care with which he tucked the folds round her, clumsily, with his right arm. She looked down and, at that moment, he raised his head. Clodagh gasped. Under the peaked cap she saw Strangway's laughing blue eyes!

"*You!*" She recoiled.

Before she could collect her wits, he had slammed the

door, swung himself round into the driving seat, released the clutch and they were off.

All she could see was the straight back in the linen overcoat that was strained over his broad shoulders, the fine column of his neck and the crisp hair, cropped and stubborn, with an upward vigorous thrust where it grew in a point above the nape.

She was conscious of a sharp reaction; a mixture of anger and excitement. So the message had come from him? He had learnt where she was. Through whom? Margot! Knowing that she would refuse his escort, he had stooped to this trick, borrowed the car—a fresh suspicion rose in her mind. She looked swiftly at the fittings. They were unfamiliar! He had hired it.

She conquered a wild impulse to open the door and leap out, conscious of the increasing speed. Ah, but she would be even with him! This finished everything. He could never be a friend. The message, too—her face darkened—"not to keep the car waiting!" Exactly what Aunt Helen would say! It was abominably clever. She resisted a faint flicker of humour that threatened to disturb her balance. And she had praised his "simplicity"!

On they went, through the empty outskirts of Richmond, a practised hand at the wheel. He could drive. There was no doubt of that. He was in a hurry too. The cool night air blew into her face, houses vanished as if by magic and they were out in the open country, dim trees and hedges advancing, like dancing figures against the night, to whirl past and make way for more.

She leaned back in the car and tried to compose her thoughts. What was to be the end of this final wild adventure? If he took her to Lowndes Square, he would have to leave her on the doorstep and he would gain nothing by that. If? A little thrill ran through her. Where were they going, at this mad pace?

Reason came to the rescue, stifling her touch of panic

and the knowledge of being trapped. It was the bet! She clutched at the thought. This was no lover's escapade but the plain answer to her challenge. He had won, that was all that mattered—sport. Her dark brows came together; she was working back through the crowded week. Since that day at Ranelagh, nothing in his speech or behaviour had pointed to more than normal social intercourse. She had secretly approved his control. But was it control or—waning fancy? Her cheeks flushed in the darkness. Had she taken too much for granted?

Men on leave did reckless things. Sometimes, after a serious wound, drink played tricks with a man's reason. Had the scene at the Molesworths' dance been the outcome of a good dinner? She recalled the blind look on his face, his inarticulate emotion, in contrast to the ease of manner which had marked him at their next meeting.

It came with the force of a disillusion, this new aspect of the case. He didn't care! She clenched her hands. No one who cared could drive on like that without a single explanation. He had taken her at her word, her intention to return the ring, but won his wager, notwithstanding. He was probably laughing at her now!

They had turned off from the main road. Her eyes, accustomed to the starlight, sought in vain for familiar landmarks. Now the car slackened speed. Before them rose a belt of woods, cutting the dreary waste of fields. There was no sign of habitations. Save for the faint hum of the motor, silence enfolded them. On either side were ragged hedges that soon gave way to a fringe of trees, the outposts of the dark wood. The brake checked their descent as they bore down the stony lane. An immense sense of solitude and unknown danger seized the girl. He didn't care! It was all a joke. No one cared. She stood alone.

The strain became intolerable. She felt a wild desire to rise and strike that unbending back, if only to hear

he sound of a voice to still the trouble of her nerves. For the first time in her life she was threatened by ysteria. Only her pride restrained her.

On they went. It was darker now, the trees closing verhead. The lamps sent circles of light before them hat seemed to accentuate the gloom. It was like entering a pit! A shiver ran down her spine; her teeth closed n her lower lip. It was cruel—she couldn't bear it!

Suddenly the car stopped, with a vicious grinding of he brakes. On their right was a gate that led into the vood; the wind came rustling through the boughs like he stealthy step of a giant. Her heart gave a great hrob; it seemed to rise up into her throat. For Strangway had silenced the engine; he was getting down from is seat.

He came to the door by her side and leaned on it omfortably. Clodagh felt paralysed. His opening words eemed utter nonsense:

"When I passed through here this evening, there was . nightingale singing. So I thought we'd come back the ame way, on the chance of hearing it. Would you care o get out?" He opened the door. "If we went a ittle way into the wood? The car would be all right ere."

With an effort, she rose to her feet. Action might elp her. She couldn't speak. As she stepped down, he caught her foot in the rug and to save herself, clutched is left arm. She heard him draw in his breath sharply.

"Oh, I've *hurt* you!" Her voice broke. All her nger was swept away in a sudden wave of tenderness, nexpected and disconcerting.

There was no mistaking his answering glance. He *id* care! A sob escaped her. Everything became lurred. . . .

She was crying now helplessly, her face pressed against is coat; in his arms, the long strain broken. It was ke leaning against a tower. The sense of his strength

flooded her. She had never before been so conscious of the physical nearness of another. Her own entity seemed lost. She was part of him—safe, at rest.

The first coherent thing that she said was:

"I'm spoiling your coat. What a fool I am!"

He made no response. She lifted her head and looked at him wonderingly, the tears still wet on her cheeks. She was to learn that in moments of passion he was inarticulate. But she felt the arm around her tremble, the blind look left his eyes.

"You mean it?" He got it out at last.

"Yes—you've won!" She tried to smile.

A moment later she stood, breathless, warding him off with both hands.

"All right. I'll be good," said Ian. "I wanted to feel sure of you. I know now!" He laughed aloud. There was a ring of triumph in it. "You darling! Let's get into the car. We can talk better there."

"Good idea." Her voice was jerky. It was no use thinking, she told herself. It had happened. She didn't want to look back. She felt amazingly happy, but shy.

As she settled herself in her old corner, she saw him drag off his chauffeur's coat.

"It's confoundedly tight," he informed her. "They only kept stock sizes and I was in a tearing hurry." He got in and drew her against him. At her faint rebellion, his arm tightened. "No, come to me? You're mine now. Thank God! I couldn't go through a week like the last again. Don't you love me?"

Her body relaxed; her hand stole into his. He knew that from Clodagh the action held an answer more definite than speech. Silence bound them still closer together.

From the wood came the sharp twitter of some bird, disturbed, in the undergrowth.

"*Was* there a nightingale?" she whispered.

"Of course." He glanced at her, surprised.

Clodagh gave a little chuckle.

"Where are we now?" Her voice was sleepy.

"Heaven knows!" He was drawing out the pins in er hat. "I took a short cut, but it proved a long ne! I was desperately afraid I should be late for you t Richmond. You don't want this hat on? It's a ummer night." He removed it. "Now isn't that more omfy?"

She nodded, her head against him, feeling his cheek ome down on her hair. He went on with his night's dventure:

"That parlourmaid scared me to death when I got here. She wanted to know where Gibbons had gone nd why Mrs. Heriot had dismissed him."

"What did you do?"

"Chucked her under the chin," said Ian. "It was happy inspiration. She slammed the door in my face."

"You didn't! Poor Rivers." Clodagh smiled.

"Then I stood by the car shivering in case I'd made hash of things. She might have complained to your unt. It would have been difficult to explain. To you oo! I may tell you that it's not exactly a habit of ine."

"Sure?" Her mischief bubbled up.

"Quite. How soon can you marry me?"

CHAPTER VI

"IF only I had a red knave!" Mrs. Heriot's voic was plaintive as she scrutinized her patience board "Yes, a red knave, or——"

"Oh, do be quiet!" came from Margot impatiently "How can I write these invitations if you're chatterin all the time?"

Mr. Heriot, in the arm-chair by the window, laid dow his evening paper.

"That's not the way to speak to your mother." Ove his glasses he looked severely at the girl, outline against the reading lamp that heightened the red gold of her hair and the whiteness of her curve neck.

Margot shrugged her shoulders and added an envelop to the heap. Mrs. Heriot, meanwhile, proceeded to tur up a card.

"The knave of diamonds! Isn't that splendid What were you saying, Edward?"

"I was correcting Margot for the rude way she addresse you." Mr. Heriot became magisterial. "I will not allo it. I've told her before."

"And a four of spades." His wife's pussy-cat fa turned slowly in his direction. "Oh, I'm sure the chi didn't mean it, did you, Margot? I wish, Edward, yo wouldn't interrupt my game. I can't *think* when peop are talking."

Margot gave a little chuckle.

"One minute, mother." She held up a list. "I s

ou've got the Wisdens here. We don't want those eavy-weights."

"They're old friends," Mrs. Heriot objected.

"Well, we'll give an alms-house party later and gather the halt and maimed!" Margot put her pen through he name.

The paper in Mr. Heriot's hand gave out an ominous ustle. He was girding up his loins for battle.

"I insist upon the James Wisdens being included." is voice rose. "We've dined with them, and we owe hem hospitality. Wisden was at school with me."

"Then we'll make it a school-treat, and ask the rate! And Father shall play kiss-in-the-ring with Mrs. Visden for a partner." Margot darted a glance at her other.

"My dear!" Mrs. Heriot was openly smiling. "A ree of clubs! It's coming out. *There!*" She added he last card and leaned back with a sigh of relief. "I ust say it's nice sometimes to have a quiet evening at ome."

The door opened on the words and Clodagh, blown out by the wind, her eyes shining, entered swiftly. he seemed to bring with her a breath of the open country, something vital and alert that disturbed the close renity of the crowded, luxurious room. Even Mrs. eriot felt it, but before she could speak Margot had rned to stare, astonished at the intruder.

"Just *look* at your hair!" She forestalled her parent. Her eyes narrowed as she saw her cousin's swift con- sion.

"It was the wind, motoring." Clodagh's hands went to her head.

"Motoring?" Mrs. Heriot stiffened. "Where have ou been?" she asked sharply.

"To Aunt Addy's. Didn't you get my message?"

"I did." Aunt Helen's lips tightened. "And I was nazed by it. If you were too ill to go out to lunch—

but I suppose that was an excuse! And now you tel me you've been to Richmond, all these hours?"

Clodagh smiled scornfully at the scepticism in he voice.

"If you've any doubt about it, you can ask Sir Ia Strangway. He drove me home, from Aunt Addy's door."

An imp of mischief danced in her eyes, for Mrs. Heriot was dumbfounded. Secretly she had been relieved by her niece's absence from the Carlton. Margot had been the chief attraction and their host most attentive. She had seen them whispering in the lounge. And all the time—her anger quickened—there had been this private arrangement with Clodagh! It was always Clodagh who marred her schemes.

"You drove home—alone—with Sir Ian?" She glanced from the girl to Mr. Heriot, immovable behind his paper.

"You needn't worry," said Clodagh coolly. "As it happens, we're engaged."

The older woman received the blow with a visible effort at control.

"*You?*" There was venom in the word.

Margot, watching the pair, laughed.

"*I* could have told you, Mother. But I didn't think Clodagh meant it." She gave her cousin a gay nod "Congratulations, old dear! Glad you took my advice."

Mr. Heriot created a diversion. He rose and, removing his pince-nez, joined the solitary figure, standing erect with an air of defiance.

"Is this true?" He held out his hand to her.

"Yes." She relaxed as she read the kindness in the dimmed old eyes.

"Then I hope you'll be very happy, my child." He added ponderously, "Of course there'll be many things to discuss. It's come rather suddenly."

"Yes." Mrs. Heriot had recovered, aware that her husband's attitude was more correct than her own

"Such a surprise! Come here and kiss me, Clodagh. I'm pleased—though a little hurt. I'm sure I've tried my best to be a mother to you, ever since poor Linda died, and I think you might have confided in me."

"But I didn't know, myself," said the girl. She accepted the older woman's embrace. "I mean, I hadn't made up my mind."

"Then he asked you before?" The pussy-cat face was both curious and suspicious. She recalled the affair of the rock-garden. "It was then," she said to herself.

Clodagh nodded and turned to her uncle.

"I've a message from Ian. He's coming to see you to-morrow morning. At ten o'clock, if that will suit you? He has to go home—to Keyn Magna—by the afternoon train. He was going earlier, but he's put it off for you. He'll be away for a week; then he wants to return and marry me."

"So soon?" Uncle Edward frowned. He was old and he didn't like to be hurried.

"If Aunt Helen can manage it." Clodagh gave her a nervous glance. "You see, we've only six weeks certain. If he's well by then he'll go back to the Front."

"I see." Mr. Heriot's face softened. "Well, well, it depends on your aunt."

"I should think so," that lady retorted. "Ridiculous—a bare fortnight!"

"Why? We could rush things through. All the more fun," Margot declared.

Clodagh, surprised, smiled at her cousin, grateful for unexpected help.

"Then that's why you refused Seaton." Mrs. Heriot pensively let fall this bombshell in their midst.

For a moment the cousins' eyes met. Then Clodagh laughed.

"Probably!" She was in the mood to forgive the past, aware of her sudden leap to freedom. All she wanted now was to be alone with her happiness. "I

think, if you don't mind, I'll say good night. I'm rather sleepy after my drive."

Mrs. Heriot looked rebellious, but Margot again put in her oar.

"Go and 'dream of him,'" she laughed.

"But to-morrow we must have a talk. Early," said her mother firmly.

"Of course." Clodagh moved to the door. It was opened for her gallantly by Uncle Edward.

"Sleep well," he told her gently. His eyes added, "I'll do my best."

"He's a dear," she thought as she ran upstairs. "The only one I shall miss. But we'll have him to stay with us and give him a real good time." Suddenly it flashed across her that here was the reason for Margot's assistance. It would be a nice house to visit, Clodagh a hostess of importance. She dismissed the idea, annoyed with herself. "I'm getting just like them," she thought, "hunting for unworthy motives. Thank Heaven, Ian's not worldly. Not in that way. He's straight as a die."

Her mind slipped back to their drive home, herself at the wheel, under protest. It was reckless of him to have used his arm. He had laughed at her when she had scolded.

"It's nothing more than neuritis now. I don't believe in all this rest. The sling's merely to remind me that I'm not to do too much."

If only he didn't suffer for it! Already she felt the possessive instinct. He was hers; she must look after him.

She began to undress, still dreaming. They had stopped at the corner by Woollands, full of unforgettable memories. "Wait for me!" Instinctively, she *had* "waited." She saw now that always across her line of vision had risen a far-off picture of the big man on the tamed horse and the contrast of his strength and silence, blurring the faces of other admirers. She knew, too, that out in

France she had watched for him, catching her breath at some transitory likeness in the long stream of khaki-clad forms. His unknown presence had haunted her, adding a zest to her active work; they had fought, parted, yet side by side, endured to the limit of their strength. And now they would fight through life together. Even when he went back, leaving her more than ever alone—she steeled her mind to consider this—she would work for him at Keyn Magna.

A sudden phantom rose up, vague and disturbing, that of his mother. But she wouldn't remain at the Manor; Clodagh gave a sigh of relief. What had he said? He didn't believe in "divided authority." Tact would overcome the trouble, and she was old, over sixty, her son born late in marriage. One could always manage old people. Like Aunt Addy, for instance. Youth would win. Youth must win. It was the hope of the coming world. She found herself absently folding up her night-gown again, laughed and drew it over her head.

Her last action was to take the signet ring from its hiding-place and slip it on her third finger. It fitted closely. There was no crest but a plain monogram. It hung, heavy, on her hand as she switched off the light over her bed. She remembered how she had tossed, awake and restless, the night before. What a difference a few hours could make! There was no lingering doubt in her heart. She loved him. For himself; his strength and his simplicity, his masterful scorn of pretence, his tenacity of purpose and his moments of tenderness. And, deep down in her heart, she loved the romance that had come true, the whole wonderful adventure. But no one should know this. Not even Sheila.

She slept, the hand with the ring upon it lying beneath her flushed cheek; the dreamless sleep of healthy youth that continued in the glare of daylight, when the blinds were drawn up by the housemaid.

She rebelled drowsily when the latter, at last, touched

her shoulder. Bewildered, she raised herself on her elbow and became aware of the girl's wide eyes fixed on the hand clutching the bed-clothes.

Suddenly she was wideawake, flooded with happy knowledge. Why shouldn't Ellen share it? She had been a friend in troubled hours. All the servants were fond of Clodagh.

She held up the ringed finger.

"I'm going to be married."

"*No*, miss!"

"Yes. To Sir Ian Strangway."

"Well, I never!" The girl looked excited. "Then you'll be 'her ladyship'?"

"So I shall!" Clodagh laughed.

"Well, I hope you'll be very happy, miss." The housemaid's face was slightly wistful and Clodagh risked a leading question.

"Are you engaged?"

"These two years, miss. He's at the Front."

"Oh, poor Ellen!" All her awakened womanhood rose to the surface; impulsively she drew the girl down and kissed her. "We shall both be in the same boat. Sir Ian will have to go back."

"Yes, miss. Thank you, I'm sure! You deserves to be happy." Ellen was flustered. "I'm glad—*that* I am! Seeing the life you've lived in this 'ouse, with Miss Margot for ever carrying tales to the old lady for her to make fine fire-balls of! There—I shouldn't 'ave said it, but it's what we all *thinks* downstairs."

Clodagh wisely turned the subject, albeit inwardly amused. "Fire-balls" was such a lovely word.

"What does your young man do, Ellen? I mean when he's not fighting."

"He's a gardener, miss. That's how I met him. In my last situation."

"Are they keeping the place open for him?"

"No, miss." The girl's face hardened.

"Well," Clodagh's eyes were shining, "there are big gardens at Keyn Magna—that's where I'm going to live. Perhaps we might arrange something, later on, when he returns."

For the first time she was seized by a sense of power, intoxicating. With money, she could help others. Ian had told her last night he would do anything to please her. What a wonderful future lay before her! Not only love and freedom, but endless opportunity. Through "Strangway's Sweets." . . .

"Why not?" she thought. "It's money earned honestly. His father knew what it was to be poor and Ian means to carry on and help the class from which they've risen." She glanced at the clock. "I'm going to see him in two hours!" Singing, she went to her bath.

Margot waylaid her as she returned; Margot, a pink kimono swathed round her dainty body, a big sponge in her hand.

"Hullo, bride! Wish you good morrow! What colour for the bridesmaids' dresses?"

"Pink," laughed Clodagh.

Her cousin began to dance, a bare foot, small as a child's, pointed, in its bed-room slipper.

"I'll work Mother! You leave her to me! Tell Ian I'm on your side." She two-stepped up the passage with a parting kick at the bath-room door.

"She's really a sport," thought Clodagh. "I do wish some one would marry her. We must have her to stay with us." Already she was match-making, catching the tone of a married woman.

Breakfast followed and interviews; Clodagh and Aunt Helen, restored in the night to placidity. A good match, and a nice house for Margot to visit in the summer. Then Ian and Uncle Edward, the library door firmly closed; finally, Aunt Helen admitted. Margot prattling about the trousseau; a florid address from the elderly butler,

" speaking, miss, for the servant's hall," Clodagh's mind in a whirl between hope and anxiety. At last, she had Ian to herself.

" Let's clear out of this," he implored her. " Everything's fixed up. I must say they've been awfully decent. I've got that car outside. Pop on your hat and we'll be off. No driving—there's a chauffeur, and I want to talk to you. You're going to lunch early with me and see me off at the station. That suit you ? " He swung her suddenly up in his arms and she had no breath to answer. " That was nice ! Oh, one minute——" He dived into an inner pocket and produced a shining rope of pearls. " I owe you this."

" Oh, Ian ! " she gasped. Suddenly her bright face clouded. " But you don't—you won ! I must find that sixpence."

" No, you've got it wrong, old lady. Think for a moment ? You couldn't expect me to wear 'em ? It was pearls for you if *you* lost. Fair play ! Put it on."

" *You* put it on. Oh, how perfectly lovely." She flung her arms round his neck.

The door opened and behind them, they heard a little ripple of laughter. They sprang apart.

" Sorry," said Margot. " Mother sent me in with a message. I was to remind Clodagh to meet us at the dressmaker's after she'd seen you off. I *say*, what ripping pearls ! "

CHAPTER VII

FROM that hour, it seemed to Clodagh that life was a race against time. She had hardly leisure to write to Ian between the endless shopping and fittings, the wedding presents to acknowledge, and the business talks with her uncle who wisely insisted on her knowing all the details of her own small income and her marriage settlement. Ian had been more than generous and Mrs. Heriot's manner changed. From a monied point of view it was a good match for her niece who, after all, would be " Lady Strangway "—this appealed to her as well as the housemaid! Margot, too, was true to her promise, an invaluable ally.

" All the heavy-weights this time! " she told Clodagh with dancing eyes. " They're the people who give good presents. I'm glad Lady Somerby's coming, though she only sent a hat-pin! Rather odd of Ian's mother not to put in an appearance, what? But that emerald pendant is worth having. I wonder what the old lady is like? "

Clodagh herself wondered. But she kept her own counsel, accepting Ian's explanation: there was so much to be done at the Manor that his mother was busy from morning to night.

" She'd rather have the house perfect—ready for you," he corrected, a shade of anxiety in his eyes, " than leave things and come up to town. She's terribly conscientious. Besides, she funks a social crowd. Always has! You mustn't mind? "

"I don't. I quite understand," Clodagh had reassured him.

Now, at last, it was over: the crowded church, the solemnity of the service, the flowers, the heat, the queer sensation of a dream as she signed her name in the vestry, and the big reception at Lowndes Square.

She was in the driving-seat of her own car, Ian's wedding-gift, smiling at the gay throng gathered on the steps and pavement. Strangway was shaking hands with her uncle. Beside Aunt Helen, tired but triumphant in the doorway, she could see Miss Desmond, fumbling for a handkerchief, aware of the tears that rose to her eyes. Pray God the child might be happy—so nice of Ian to have kissed her—if only it lasts? Such a lovely dress! Her thoughts were in wild confusion.

Margot came running through the guests. She jumped up on the step.

"There!" She threw into Clodagh's lap a tiny pair of wooden sabots. "Shoes, for luck! And don't forget me?" She laughed up into her cousin's face.

"Now!" Ian sprang in by his wife. "Sure you want to drive?" he asked.

"Sure." She kissed Margot again. "I shan't forget. You must come to us whenever you like. Good-bye!" She gave a last wave and they were off with a jerk that testified to the driver's emotion.

"Thank Heaven!" Ian breathed in her ear. "I couldn't have stood much more." He added quickly. "Though your people have been awfully kind. Here's *our* corner." His voice softened, then grew sharp. "Go steady!" They had narrowly missed the wheel of a taxi as they swung round into the traffic.

The danger acted as a tonic, and Clodagh laughed.

"You leave it to me! If I hadn't married you I was going to become a lady-chauffeur." She added wickedly. "Ask you to find me a country place and vouch for my character!"

"I shouldn't have risked that," said Ian. "I wish you'd drive a bit slower."

She darted a quick look at him and obeyed, guessing that his nervousness was on her account.

"See what a good wife I am! Because you *asked*, and didn't order."

"Oh, is that the tip?" Her husband smiled.

On they went, escaping from London, mile after mile of streets and suburbs, with fugitive patches of dried common until before them opened out a vista of hop-fields and pasture land, all the wooded beauty of Kent.

Long since they had relapsed into the silence induced by speed and constant resistance to the wind, as they swept onwards to the coast. It had been Clodagh's own idea to go to Hythe for a week of bathing and sea-breezes, then home to Keyn Magna. It would be invigorating after the spent air of town. But the car had come as a surprise. Strangway had suggested a chauffeur, but Clodagh vetoed this, intolerably shy at the thought of a servant who might publish their state at the hotel. Besides, he would spoil those first hours alone with Ian. She was beginning to regret it—though she would not hear of his taking her place—by the time they reached the rocky ridge of hills that guards the southern coast.

At last the sea lay before them, mistily blue, crescent-shaped, with the long arm of Dungeness stretched out to hold its lantern. They slid into the old town, hiding forgotten among its trees, like an urchin playing truant, its school the distant line of water. Between these stretched the salt meadows, once submerged and the scene of a busy harbour life with building yards and bales of goods from the foreign vessels that came and went under the guns of the mighty castle, when Hythe, one of the Cinque Ports, played its part in the War of the Barons.

Now, where great ships had anchored, stood a row of lodging-houses on the primitive esplanade that ended

before a big hotel, standing apart, with its golf course and well-kept, shady gardens.

They drew up at the door.

"Looks jolly," said Ian, with a glance at the tennis and croquet lawns. "Something to do!" He helped his wife down.

She straightened her aching arms.

"Tired?" he asked.

She was on her mettle.

"Not a bit, but I'm longing for tea."

They had it, on the wide balcony facing south, overhanging the sea. A bare stone's-throw away, it was breaking gently on the shingle as the long, smooth rollers crept in. Low down on the horizon, the sun sent out streamers of amber and rose.

"Isn't it lovely?" Clodagh drew a deep breath of the salt-laden air. "I suppose I ought to go and unpack."

"Why? Lots of time," said Ian. "Doesn't the water look nice. I vote we have a bathe first."

"*Now?*" Her hazel eyes widened.

"Yes. Freshen us up before dinner. Wouldn't you like it?"

She hesitated.

"You bathe, and I'll look on."

"Oh, no, that's no fun!"

She gave in at once.

"All right. I'll come. I must fish out my bathing-dress." With an effort, she rose from the low chair, throwing off her touch of languor.

"Good! Sure you want to?" he asked her.

"Sure."

They bathed, happy as children, in the water still warm from the heat of the day and raced each other up to their rooms.

Darkness fell over the sea, broken once by a faint flicker as a ship signalled to another far off by Gris Nez.

"France!" Clodagh stared at it from her bedroom

window as she dried the damp curls on her neck. "In the night we shall hear the guns," she thought.

She was only half-way through her unpacking when she realized it was time to dress.

"You ready?" called Ian, a few minutes later, through the door of the adjoining room.

"Nearly!"

"Can I help?" He appeared on the threshold, a fine figure in his evening clothes, bringing with him a sense of tireless vitality.

"If you could hook me up," begged Clodagh. She gave a despairing glance around her. "I must leave the room as it is."

"The chambermaid will see to it." He bent and kissed her bare shoulder. "Dear!" He looked up into her face. "Are you going to be happy here with me?"

"Yes—if you'll fasten my frock," she laughed. "Those two hooks which I can't reach." She was trying to disguise her shyness.

He mastered them and they went down to dinner.

The big room was half-empty, for the season had not yet begun. At the next table sat a nurse with a little girl, sunburnt and fretful, who played with her milk-pudding and yawned.

"It's too late for that mite," said Ian. "I don't believe in hotels for kids. Do you?"

"No." Clodagh's face was thoughtful. "You like children?"

"Rather!"

The wine-waiter bustled up, and opened the list at the champagnes. He had recognized a honeymoon couple. His manner was almost fatherly!

Strangway's eyes twinkled. He made his choice with deliberation.

"This ought to buck you up," he said gaily to his wife.

"I don't need it," she laughed back.

"Good. I've got an idea, old lady. It isn't exactly lively here. Let's clear out after dinner, take a taxi, drive over to Folkestone and dance at the Metropole. You on?"

For a moment she did not reply.

"You're not? All right." His face fell.

"But I am," she cried. "It sounds—jolly!"

"I've never really danced with you." He was speaking with boyish eagerness. "That night at the Albert Hall, it was too crowded. We needn't stay. Just a turn or two, then back to bed."

"So long as you don't use that arm," she reminded him.

"Oh, dash my arm! It's our wedding-night." He raised his glass and drank to her, his blue eyes full of passion.

"Don't!" said Clodagh, her cheeks hot. "People will see."

"That I'm drinking your health? Why shouldn't they? You're my wife." A possessive note rang in his voice.

"Well, they won't think so, if you make love to me at dinner." Clodagh gave a little chuckle. "It isn't 'done.' You ought to be frowning at the food! What time shall we start?"

"For Folkestone? Directly we've had our coffee. I'll order a taxi now." He beckoned to a waiter.

Clodagh, amused, watched him. The wine had drowned her fatigue and restored the spirit of adventure. What a pace he went at everything, his energy inexhaustible.

"I shall have to keep up with him," she thought. "I wish I weren't so out of condition. It's all that flabby London life."

But she was desperately tired by the time they returned to the hotel. As she entered her room it seemed to her that the chambermaid had only added to the confusion; her sole effort had been to clear the bed! She slipped

quickly out of her dress and, her head aching, turned to her task.

In the dressing-room she could hear her husband whistling cheerfully a two-step which had caught his fancy.

Suddenly the door opened.

"Why, you aren't undressed!" He stared at her. "What *are* you doing?"

"Getting straight." She was shutting a drawer, on her knees.

"You poor child! Let me help?" He fell on the remaining garments. "These can go in the other room." He was back before she had time to rise. "Now, no more—I won't have it!" He stooped and drew her into his arms. "You love me?"

"Yes." Her eyes were closed.

"Then, kiss me?"

She gave herself up to him, conscious of the amazing gulf between her weakness and his strength, in a stupor of love and weariness.

On the third day she came to her senses. She must assert herself or be swamped for ever in her husband's possessive will.

It was six o'clock. They had started at ten with tennis —"pat-ball," Ian called it, hampered by his injured arm —bathed at twelve, raced through lunch to get off in the car for a long drive in the broiling heat, returning barely in time for tea. Now Ian suggested croquet.

"I can play with one hand." He crushed her objections. "I swear I won't use the other. Come along, old lady!"

"No. I'm going on the beach, for a laze. By myself." She smiled at him. "You'll be able to get your letters done."

"Shall I? His eyes twinkled. "I'm coming with you."

She shook her head.

"I don't want you. Really, Ian. I'm going to have a quiet read."

"But, dash it all, what shall *I* do?" He stared at her, his face blank. "Oh, be a sport? We won't play croquet. I'll laze too."

She was tempted. She averted her eyes, steeling her heart.

"We should only talk. I want to be alone for a little."

"Oh, very well." He turned abruptly. "See you at dinner." He strode off, without looking back, annoyed by her opposition.

The beach was hot. She went up to her room and lay down on the big bed, resolute but unhappy.

"I can't let him always take me for granted. I mustn't." She set her teeth and analysed her intentions. "No, it *isn't* selfishness. It's sense. If I go on like this giving in on every occasion, I shall become Ian's slave. Then he'll get tired of me."

Miserable, she took up a book and began to read mechanically. The sense of the words evaded her, the print danced before her eyes, hot with the tears she kept back. Imperceptibly they closed and she fell into a light sleep.

She awoke refreshed, and not alone. Her husband was bending over her. Still drowsy, she put up an arm and drew his face down to hers.

"You little rebel! I shan't kiss you."

At his words her reason came flooding back.

"Because I was honest?" Her eyes searched his.

"No. You must always be that," he parried.

"Well, then?"

"Oh, I don't know." He was puzzled. "Anyhow, let's make it up?"

"But we haven't quarrelled." Her voice was grave. "It's just because I don't wish to quarrel that, sometimes, I must decide things too. It's only fair play, Ian."

"But you didn't *want* to be with me." He looked like a sulky schoolboy.

"That's no real test of love. You don't always want to be with your mother, yet you're very fond of her, aren't you?"

"It's quite different. You're my wife." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Besides, the old lady's not that sort. She likes to rule."

"And you won't be ruled?" Clodagh's eyes lit up.

"No, why should I? I'm not a child."

"Well, that's exactly how *I* feel. Now, can't you see, darling?"

He considered it grudgingly.

"A question of wills. Is that it? But you promised to obey me?"

She drew herself up.

"I never said it! I left the word out. It's archaic! I couldn't do the other things if you expected blind obedience."

"What other things?" He was amused.

"'Love and honour.' They're part of the vow." The girl's voice was low and earnest. "You don't give those to a tyrant."

"Am I a tyrant?"

"Not yet. If I were weak——" She stopped abruptly.

He saw that her lips were quivering; his generosity awoke.

"All right! I think I understand. Don't let's say any more. Just pull me up when I'm selfish—give my old head a knock!" He inclined it towards her, half-seriously, half in mischief.

She ran her fingers through his hair, so crisp and alive that it seemed to tingle, then laid her lips to it. His head slipped down to her shoulder.

"Forgiven?" he asked drowsily. "Well, look here, darling, I've been planning. Let's go to Rye to-morrow?

Make an early start and lunch there. You needn't drive ; we'll find a chauffeur. Then we can sit behind and talk." He checked himself suddenly. "Unless you'd rather laze on the beach ? "

Clodagh's arm around him tightened.

"No. I'd love to go to Rye."

CHAPTER VIII

THEY broke their journey home at Albrey, Clodagh happy and secretly proud of Ian's conquest of heir hosts. The artist admired his splendid physique, nd Sheila's heart was won by the way Ian played with ittle Timmy. The visit came, all too soon, to an end.

Now they were nearing Keyn Magna. They passed hrough the gate of the lower lodge, Clodagh aware of rising excitement when, at the end of the winding rive she caught her first glimpse of the Manor; a long white house, half-hidden by creepers, with a portico and urved steps.

"It's nicer on the other side," Ian told her eagerly. The front of the house is round at the back, as the rishman said!"

Clodagh laughed.

An elderly butler received them and announced olemnly that "her ladyship" was in the drawing-room. an swept Clodagh across the hall, stone-flagged with a ne old staircase, and opened one of a pair of doors, high nd narrow, facing them. The girl paused on the thres-old, dazzled by the flood of sunshine that poured through he deep bays of the finely proportioned room. She eard Ian say, "You there, mater?" and watched him urge forward.

Suddenly nervous, she saw a little, old woman, very rect in a high-backed chair by the farthest window. he was dressed in old-fashioned widow's weeds. Under he frilled white cap and the prim bandeaux of iron-grey

hair, her pointed face resembled a rat's. A very alert and determined rat, with the thin lips drawn tightly across the prominent front teeth.

She laid down her embroidery with deliberate care, rose to her feet, and received her son's embrace.

"How are you, Ian?" Her thin voice was dignified and repressive.

"Fine! And you?"

"I'm as well as you could expect, my son." She advanced slowly. "And this is your wife?" For a moment she surveyed the girl with her bright, beady eyes, then as their hands met, raised her cheek.

Clodagh stooped and kissed it. At the contact she felt a swift repulsion. "I shall never like her," she thought. She mastered her instinct and managed to smile.

"I hope we're not late?" she asked, to break the momentary strain. "We had to wait for our lunch at Bath."

Lady Strangway did not answer. She was calmly surveying her daughter-in-law.

"She doesn't look very strong." She addressed her remark to Ian.

"But I am," said the girl, taken aback, "I'm wiry!

"Perhaps she is tired from her journey." The rat-like face was unconvinced. "She would like to take off her hat for tea. Will you show her the way, Ian? My knee is rather bad to-day."

This impersonal form of address was new to Clodagh. She glanced at her husband. The big man looked ur easy.

"All right. Which room?" His voice was abrupt.

"The one I used to occupy." Lady Strangway smiled with a bitter twist of her lips.

As they went upstairs, Ian slipped a hand through h wife's arm.

"You mustn't mind," he told her, "if the old lad

eems a bit stiff. She's shy, you know. Here we are!"
.e opened a door on the gallery.
Again there came a blaze of sunshine. Clodagh looked
agerly around her; at the massive Victorian furniture,
ıe knee-hole dressing-table, double-bed with side-curtains
nd the modern engravings on the walls. Everything was
ootlessly clean but the windows were tightly closed, and
a the air hung a faint odour—suggestive of old age—of
romatic vinegar, hair-wash and eucalyptus.
Her first instinctive action was to throw up the nearest
indow. Ian imitated her.
"The mater's so afraid of dust!" He laughed and
as going to add more when, with a tap at the open door,
ıe maid entered, bearing hot water. She placed the
an on the wash-stand.
"Can I help you, m'lady?" she asked.
"No, thanks." Clodagh smiled.
She saw a touch of relief come into the servant's face.
he looked efficient but subdued.
"Well, I'll have a wash," said Ian. He vanished into
is dressing-room.
Clodagh leaned out of the window. Her momentary
epression passed as her eyes drank in the garden before
er; the fine old trees, the smooth lawns that ended in
azzling flower-beds, against the double line of a hedge,
lipped and sombre, almost black in contrast with the
merald grass.
"That must be the arbutus-walk," she decided happily,
nd her glance moved on to the distant view; the down-
ard slope of smiling country with a village nestling in
he hollow round the ancient tower of a church. "It's
ovely," she thought. "I don't wonder Ian's mother
esents a usurper! I shall have to remember that and
e tactful."
She unlocked her dressing-case, surprised to see the
ggage already in its place, tidied her hair and resumed
er hat.

"For we're sure to go out." She smiled to herself. "Ian will want to race round and show me everything at once!"

As she dried her hands, she noticed that the door was ajar. She moved noiselessly to close it. There came a faint rustle beyond and she peered out, to catch a glimpse of something white that fluttered and vanished through an archway leading to one of the wings. It looked uncommonly like the streamer of a widow's cap!

She shook off the disturbing thought. It must have been one of the maids, she decided, anxious to peep at the new mistress. In the adjoining room she could hear Ian splashing. With a glance at the clock she called out, "I'm going down," and made her way into the drawing-room.

It was empty and she could examine it. She did so, frowning, for everywhere colour and form jarred on her senses. It had evidently been furnished by some expensive London firm with a passion for gilt and brocade; but into their Louis-Seize scheme had been introduced a rose-wood suite upholstered in ruby velvet. The grand piano was covered with a satin cloth in the same colour fringed with gold. In the centre, holding a purple gloxinia, was a silver presentation bowl. On either side of the beautiful marble mantelpiece hung a portrait in a massive frame of Lady Strangway, and of her husband. They testified, so Clodagh decided, to the artist's love of truth and detail.

She gave a helpless little laugh. She felt sorry for the room with its beautiful proportions condemned to this commonplace old age.

"But I'll have you to myself soon," she told it consolingly. "Then we'll get you old-world chintzes and banish that terrible rose-wood suite."

She started. The butler had appeared.

"Tea is served, m'lady," he announced. A faint smile puckered his lips as he caught her quick look around her. "In the dining-room. This way, m'lady."

She followed him across the hall and drew a breath of relief and pleasure as through the open door she saw panelled walls and the restful lines of Chippendale and Sheraton. Here was a room undefiled.

At the head of the long table, Lady Strangway was standing, scrutinizing a vast and imposing array of food. There were hot cakes, cold cakes, scones and biscuits, jams and honey, watercress, radishes and clotted cream. It suggested, to Clodagh, a children's party. She heard Ian's step behind her.

"Here we are, mater!" He glanced at his wife "Why, you haven't taken off your hat?"

"No. I thought we should go out," she explained, surprised by his slight frown.

From Lady Strangway came a sniff.

"Will you come here, Clodagh?" She laid a hand on the chair-back before her.

"Oh, no!" The girl was embarrassed. "That's *your* place. Please?"

"As you like." Lady Strangway settled herself before the massive silver tray. "Does your wife take sugar?" she asked her son.

Clodagh, in her anxiety to do justice to the amazing spread, ate until she could eat no more, with an odd feeling of punishment. Conversation was mostly upheld by Ian and her mother-in-law. At last they rose from the table.

"I wonder how long she's going to stay," Clodagh thought. She hoped, in vain, that Lady Strangway would refuse Ian's polite invitation to accompany them round the garden.

"I left my cloak in Phœbe's room," his mother announced and went off to fetch it.

Ian smiled down at his wife.

"I'll soon have you to myself." He had guessed her secret disappointment. "Though I wish you'd taken off your hat. The mater's rather old-fashioned, always has

a sit-down tea. She was used to it in Yorkshire. That's where she was born, you know."

Clodagh nodded.

"Sorry, old dear. Who is Phœbe?"

"Mrs. Mitton, the housekeeper. She's been with us for years on end, was our cook before we came here. Rather a crony of the mater's. She's invaluable! You can leave everything to her." He touched his wife's cheek, smiling. "No fussing about the food for you! She'll see to it, and the servants too. Aren't you glad?"

"In a way." Clodagh looked thoughtful. "I shall want something to do, though."

"Oh, you shan't be unemployed!" He laughed. "There's a lot to be seen to outside and I shall expect your help there. Besides, we'll have some jolly rides."

The widow returned, on her head a mushroom hat with a mourning veil, streaming over her thin shoulders. Under its brim, her restless eyes watched Clodagh as they followed the well-kept paths that skirted the lawns, whilst her son pointed out familiar features of the beautiful old place. Clodagh's spirits rose; for the garden fitted into her dreams, and Ian was so patently happy. At length they came to the glass, to the west of a long shrubbery, a dazzling vista that stretched out to the walls of the vegetable domain.

They passed the first house filled with tomatoes and entered a vinery. Great bunches of grapes hung overhead. Ian showed them to her with pride. He opened a farther door.

"Nectarines in here. Too warm for you?" He saw that her cheeks were flushed.

"No, I like it! It smells so nice." She drew in the moist, scented air. "Oh, what a lovely rose!"

In the farthest corner by the door was a creeper, with drooping waxen buds, winding its way to the roof.

"Like one to wear?" He found his penknife, cut a pale blossom and gave it to her. "I think I deserve a

iss for that ? " He glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. ady Strangway had turned and was making her way lowly back. " Quick ! "

Their lips met. Clodagh smiled. The stolen caress was weet.

" Will you try a nectarine ? " he suggested.

" My dear boy ! After that tea ? "

They laughed simultaneously. The glass echoed the outhful note as though it joined in their mirth, touched y the same spell of nature in this forcing-house for the ruits of the earth.

" To-morrow then, at eleven o'clock ? That's the best ime for it. A rendezvous ? " He looked into her eyes, lled with little golden lights. " You darling ! You like ny home—our home ? "

" It's perfect ! " breathed Clodagh.

" Then, come on ! " He stirred himself. " I want you o see the stables." He wheeled round and suddenly emembered his mother. " Hullo ! Where's the mater ? "

They hurried back and emerged into the cooler evening ir. Far away, they could see a little black figure, veil treaming, hastening towards the house. It vanished ound the shrubbery.

" I'd better go after her," said Ian. " Take your ime ! " His face was anxious.

He was off, covering the ground with his long, easy tride. He caught her up on the lawn and laid a hand n her arm, but Lady Strangway was not to be checked.

" Where are you off to, mater ? " he asked, and added uickly, " What's the matter ? "

For the peaked, averted face was white and quivering ith anger.

" *My* rose ! The one your father planted." The words ame out with a little hiss.

" Well ? " Strangway stared at her.

" I'm going home," said his mother. " To Tibby's me. Yes, *now*. If you can't understand, it's useless

talking." She quickened her steps. Under her breath she was muttering. Ian caught disjointed phrases. "A slip of a girl! Helpless—puny. Your old mother—— You'll need her yet!"

"Now, look here, mater?" he began. "I think this is going too far——"

She broke in sharply:

"Oh, I see! She's been setting you against me already. With her airs and graces—a hat on for tea! *London* ways, I suppose?"

With an effort, the man controlled himself.

"Clodagh isn't a Londoner. I don't know why you talk like this. You've always been urging me to marry and give you a grandchild——" He stopped abruptly for Lady Strangway had laughed. A bitter laugh tinged with malice.

They had reached the porch and she turned and faced him.

"Fine children *she*'ll bear you! If you'd taken your old mother's advice— But it's too late now! Will you order the brougham? I'm going to say good-bye to Phœbe. And have a last look round the linen-room." Her face changed on the word, piteous. She bit her lip.

Ian saw his chance.

"Won't you show it to Clodagh first? I'd like her to see how you kept it."

Lady Strangway hesitated. At that moment the girl came up with the pair and Ian turned to her.

"I've asked the mater before she goes to show you her linen-room."

She caught his perturbed, significant glance.

"Oh, do?" She addressed Lady Strangway. "I've heard about it and your wonderful work."

Lady Strangway, cornered, agreed.

"If you like. Perhaps it would be wiser."

She led the way upstairs, through the archway, produced

k key from her bag, and opened a door at the end of the ring.

"I keep it locked," she told Clodagh. "No one comes here but myself. Came," she corrected, and entered the room.

It was lined with presses. In the space by the window was a table with a checked cloth and an old-fashioned mahogany work-box, flanked by a straight-backed chair and a footstool.

She opened the nearest press.

"The bed-linen, in daily use."

Clodagh looked over her bony shoulder. The shelves were divided into sections, each one labelled with its contents. The spotless piles were exquisite, the corners of pillow-slips and sheets worked with raised monograms, the hems put on with drawn-thread work.

"My mother's a wonderful needlewoman," Ian observed diplomatically.

"Did you do these yourself?" Clodagh looked awed.

"Naturally." Lady Strangway moved on to the next cupboard. "The ordinary table-linen." She closed the doors, after a brief inspection. "In here"—she turned to the final press—"is the best linen. It's valuable now. You don't get damask like that in these days." A touch of triumph lit up her face. "Of course I mend it myself." She pointed to a tiny darn like a cobweb lost in the pattern. "Are you good at your needle?" she inquired.

"I couldn't do anything fine like that," said the girl honestly.

The answer seemed to please Lady Strangway.

"No." She sniffed. "I expect not. I was brought up differently. My mother believed in domestic virtues. She placed them before accomplishments. I understand housekeeping." She shut up the press and went to the window. "Here you will find the different threads"—she lifted the lid of the work-box—"scissors, needles, all

you require." A faint sigh escaped her lips as, mechanically, she replaced a thimble.

Clodagh heard it. A sudden wave of pity flooded her generous heart. She felt like an interloper.

"I only wish I had half your knowledge! Couldn't you—wouldn't you teach me?" she asked.

Lady Strangway looked up. She seemed to be weighing the request, deciding upon her own answer.

"I will, if you're really anxious to learn. But you can't do fine needlework in a day." For the first time she smiled at the girl. "Meanwhile, if you like, I will keep an eye on the best linen. Until you really understand it."

"How nice of you!" Clodagh hastened to say. She thought it would please Ian and pave the way to a better understanding, though inwardly she dreaded the lessons.

"Then that's settled," said Lady Strangway. As they left the room, to Clodagh's surprise, she replaced the key in her own bag. "I will come and give it out on Fridays. That's the linen day," she explained. "I generally look it over on Mondays and do the mending that's required before the laundry-maids remove it. So, if you see the door open, you needn't worry. I shall be there."

Clodagh agreed, but with hidden dismay. She had slipped blindly into the trap. Now, Lady Strangway would have an excuse for haunting her son's house, for peering and prying and gossip with Phœbe.

Ian, too, looked disconcerted, but he kept a discreet silence. To Clodagh as she watched the pair there came a startling revelation. The big man was afraid of his mother; of that little rat of a woman whose will was even stronger than his.

Part II

MARGOT

" La durée de nos passions ne dépend pas plus de nous que la durée de notre vie."

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

CHAPTER IX

JUNE had come round again, but not with the flaunting glory of that one three years ago when Clodagh had natched her will against Ian's. It had been raining all he morning, but now a watery sun peeped out above he arbutus-walk. From where she lay on the sofa in he room she had made her own, Clodagh could see the ark line of shrubs, cutting across the lowering clouds, ut no view of the smiling valley, where life went on, igorous, free, outside her prison of ill-health.

A letter with a mourning border quivered and slipped rom her nervous fingers, to lie unheeded on the floor. t was from Margot, now a widow. For Archdale, whom he had married in the autumn of the year when Clodagh ad come to Keyn Magna, had fallen a victim to the courge of influenza that had swept the country in the ast winter months.

Margot, a widow? How strange it seemed! Clodagh's nind slipped back to the old days at Lowndes Square. ong since, the house had been sold, to meet fresh demands n the Heriots' resources. Margot had found a service at for her parents on Campden Hill, and one for herself nd "Arch" in St. James's. The furniture had been ivided between the two establishments; the income as ell, for Archdale was poor. Mrs. Heriot, as ever, had eakly concurred in her daughter's arrangements. As Margot said, Campden Hill was "very healthy" and it ould be "nice" to be freed from the trouble of servants nd housekeeping.

Mr. Heriot had been the sufferer. Never robust, the confined space and indifferent food had resulted in a lingering illness which had lately assumed an alarming aspect. So Margot wrote, acknowledging a hamper of fruit sent from the Manor.

Poor Uncle Edward! Tears rose in Clodagh's eyes as she thought of him, his gentle studious ways, unfailing kindness, and courtesy. He had been coming to stay at Keyn Magna the summer before on a long-promised visit but, at the last moment, Clodagh had been taken ill; a second, and serious, miscarriage. Since then, she had not seen the Heriots. Now, again, she was hoping to become a mother before the autumn leaves would fall.

This business of having children! How it upset her cherished dreams—Clodagh stared out through the haze drawn by the sun from the wet lawns. In the first year she had been so brave, so filled with pride when she knew that Ian's hopes might be realized. For his heart was set on having a son. There had followed the cruel disappointment, rendered unbearable to Clodagh by her mother-in-law's attitude, faintly triumphant, inimical.

Although Ian remained devoted, the second fiasco had seemed to draw him closer to his remaining parent. Her sympathy was all for him; he turned to her for advice. He was one of those men who look on child-birth as the natural destiny of a woman, a part of the little ups and downs to be expected in married life. Clodagh did not ask for pity, but she would have valued his understanding. It was bitter to be accounted a failure.

She had worked so hard in those first months, always by Ian's side, riding, hunting, improving the place—those happy months that seemed a dream. Too hard, so the doctor told her. The long hours in the saddle, the effort to keep up to the pace her husband set, and to rule the house, with that peering, prying old woman, secretly her enemy, working discord through Phœbe Mitton, had

roduced the inevitable collapse. But Ian couldn't understand."

Long since, she had given up all thought of restoring he Manor inside to its ancient dignity and beauty. The ose-wood suite had been banished and the gilded chairs bscured by chintz, but nothing could be done with a oom policed by that modern, middle-class pair guarding he mantelpiece. Ian had vetoed his wife's proposal to ang the portraits elsewhere. In a better light, had been er excuse. It would hurt the old lady's feelings. So he rgued, but Clodagh guessed the truth; he shrank from scene with his mother, still shadowed by the fear of is boyhood.

He had no artistic taste. It was *his* home; he was atisfied. Everything in the house was "good," or, in ther words, expensive. There was not an ounce of neanness in him, but he was stubborn on all points that ouched his inheritance. Secretly, he disliked the sitting-oom on the ground-floor which Clodagh furnished for erself with what he called "shabby old stuff" picked p in their drives to Bristol. It had cool, grey walls ke Aunt Addy's, books and a few good pieces of china, bove all, a sense of space. To Clodagh it was the only oom in the house where rest was possible, not only for er body but mind.

Her music, too, had been renounced. Ian had a ramophone which satisfied his rare desire for a "tune" the long evenings. He never read if he could help it nd, like many men who despise books, he resented his ife's taste for them. However drowsy he might be fter a long day in the open, the sight of Clodagh absorbed a novel acted on him as an irritant.

"Oh, put that away! I want to talk."

How well she knew the phrase! Or the other form hich his jealousy took—for he was jealous, like his other—a sudden recrudescence of passion.

Still, he loved her. There was no doubt of that. If

he went up to town on business he would return by th evening train. They had not been parted for a nigh since the day she had married him. The end of the wa synchronized with his complete recovery, for the medica board would not pass him in time to permit his bein " in at the finish ! " The hope of active service over, h had retired at the first chance.

And she loved him with all her heart. But she wa weary, living on her nervous strength. The dread o another failure obsessed her and shadowed all dreams o the coming child.

" If only it's a son," she prayed. " Then Ian will b satisfied."

She heard a step, light and brisk, approaching throug the silent house. Instinctively she drew herself up agains the cushions, and recovered Margot's straying letter. I was a Friday, she remembered. She was prepared fo the narrow face that came round the corner of the doo

" Well, Clodagh, how are you, dear ? " Lady Strang way advanced. " I've been putting out the linen, so thought I'd run in for a few words." Her beady eye darted round the room and she gave a slight sniff as the fell on a hat and cloak thrown carelessly on to a chai " You've been out, I see ? " Deliberately she straight ened the garments.

" Not yet. I brought my things down in case cleared."

" Well, it's quite fine now," said the older woma " You're looking rather peaky to-day. A little air woul do you good."

" What is she up to ? " thought Clodagh.

Before she could answer, the problem was solved. Fo Ian appeared on the threshold, in well-worn riding breeche and gaiters.

" Have you told her ? " he asked his mother. " No Then, look here, old lady "—he turned to his wife, h face eager—" I'm going to try that new hunter over th

umps in the lower field. Like to see it ? " As she did ot reply at once, he went on, with his happy smile, It's lovely out and the mater thinks it's bad for you oping indoors. So I've ordered the pony-chair. No xertion and the mater'll be with you. You on ? "

She was searching for an excuse when she caught a lance that swept across her from mother to son. It aid clearly : " Giving in. I told you so ! "

She reacted to it, with a flicker of her old spirit.

" Rather ! "

With an effort, she lowered her feet to the ground. A ight giddiness overtook her, but she set her teeth, moved cross to her hat and pulled it down over her hair.

" Is that straight ? " She smiled at Ian.

" Straight as a die ! " He folded the long cloak round er, stooped, kissed her pale face and whispered something her ear.

Lady Strangway watched the pair jealously.

What a child he was, Clodagh thought ; so sure that would be a son, and a sportsman like himself !

They went out and she was tucked into the bath-chair, ith a rug round her knees and feet. It was drawn by a ber pony who turned his head inquiringly, expecting his sual bribe of sugar.

" Must have a lump, poor old chap ! I'll go in and tch some," Ian announced, " give it him in the field. ou go on. I'll catch you up."

The cortège started, Clodagh driving, Lady Strangway alking beside her.

They went by the road used for carts at the side of e building, down the hill and across the meadows. on they heard a sound of hoofs and Ian trotted past, e big bay he rode dancing, as it felt the turf under its ofs. He waved his hand, and went on to a gate, ened it, after two futile attempts, and held it back th his crop, controlling the fidgety horse.

They were through ! Clodagh drew a breath of relief.

Her nerves were out of order to-day; she jumped as the gate slammed behind them.

"You'd better stay here," said Ian. He placed his audience near the hedge where they had a good view of the hurdles, and the water-jump, newly-constructed in the middle of the long field. "That's when the fun will begin," he told them. "He doesn't like water—he's got to learn! But we'll put him over the hurdles first. You all right?" He smiled at Clodagh and was off, laughing as the horse bucked. They made a fine pair in the sunshine.

His mother drew out a camp-stool and settled herself by the side of the chair. The pony was nibbling the short grass and, somewhere above their heads, a lark had risen to pour out its throbbing song. Clodagh's tension relaxed. She lay back listening, the loosened reins in her hands.

"Shapes well," she decided as the new hunter without effort took the first low hurdle in his stride; then, with a dainty air of precision, mastered the "in-and-out" jump. She saw Ian's perfect hands lift him over the stone wall and her husband bend to pat the warm neck as they cantered quietly round the field. They paused at the end by the gate. He set the horse at the water-jump.

"It's all right," thought Clodagh, but as her lips shaped the words, the glint of sunshine upon water frightened the horse and it swerved aside, reared and bolted straight towards them.

The accident happened in a moment. Clodagh unnerved, rose from her seat, tearing wildly at the rug that impeded her movements; the pony, startled, raised its head and suddenly backed, throwing his mistress off her balance. She pitched sideways out of the chair, still entangled in the rug and fell full-length on the hard ground. She lay there, semi-conscious, moaning.

. . . . .

Twenty-two hours later, a son was born prematurely

lead. They had called in a specialist from Bristol, for Clodagh's life hung in the balance. But slowly, painfully, she emerged from the Valley of the Shadow, into a world that she feared more than the old consciousness of death.

For, this time, her spirit was broken. She lay there, a nervous wreck, too weak to lift a hand to her face when the slow tears trickled down it; without hope, without movement, save when she heard a brisk, light step approach Ian's dressing-room, given over to the nurse. Then she would begin to tremble, her eyes, sunk in her white face, would turn imploringly to the latter, her lips part in a frightened whisper:

"Don't let her in! I can't bear it!"

The nurse, a fine, capable woman from Bristol, unmoved by the local esteem in which Lady Strangway was held, would bar her entrance resolutely.

Her ladyship tried to oust her. But, for once in his life, Ian was scared. He pinned his faith upon the doctor who had nothing but praise for the nurse's skill. For the doctor knew Lady Strangway.

As the weeks passed on, he was worried by his patient's condition. She would improve, then relapse into the old weak stupor. He talked it over with the nurse; she opened her mind to him.

"Her husband's too much for her. She's always worse after his visits. Not that he isn't kind, but he's hopeless in a sickroom! Too vigorous. His one idea is to 'cheer her up.' Yet a little company's good for her. What she wants is another woman. Hasn't she a mother or sister —or even a married friend?"

The doctor sounded Clodagh. She listened inertly to his suggestions, but the thought took root in her mind. Some one of her own, to stand between her and Lady Strangway; some one with a quiet voice who couldn't reproach her silently for not being strong, "like other women!" This was one of her sick fancies.

The day when she was moved to the sofa in the window and saw again the dark hedge of arbutus, the flowers, the trees and the open sky, a memory returned to her of another garden, high up on the downs, and of Valentine Logue, silent, painting.

To escape to that haven of peace—to Sheila? Sheila was the friend she wanted. She had suffered herself and would understand.

When Ian appeared, fresh from his ride, eager to note the slightest improvement, she mastered her faint shrinking from the vibration of his voice and the feeling of faintness that overtook her when he stooped for his morning kiss.

"Would you mind if I had Sheila here?" she asked him nervously.

"Of course not. Good idea! She'll cheer you up. Shall I write to her?"

"Please." She relapsed into silence.

Sheila came at the end of the week, bringing a breath of the outside world, a sympathy born of true affection and a tact that ignored the divided household.

She was shocked by the sight of Clodagh, this ghost of the once vivid girl. There was something more than physical weakness holding her back from recovery; it was an illness of the mind. So Sheila decided, and searched for the cause.

The nurse gave her the first clue:

"She's had a bad start in married life. What she needs is a good year's rest without the fear of another child. I've had patients like that before." She sighed. "But men are born selfish."

Sheila, that evening, dressed with care for her *tête-à-tête* dinner with her host. She encouraged him to talk and Ian became confidential. It was evident that he saw himself in the light of a local magnate, a coming power in the county, where most of the landed gentry were too impoverished by the war to keep up the old tradition.

heir hope buried with their sons in some far-off grave in rance.

" It's bad luck," said Ian. " But there it is ! It's p to the new generation to carry on and fill the gaps." Ie was optimistic once more, now his wife was out of anger, but he saw Sheila's eyes narrow and added, ather hastily, " Not yet, of course. But we're both of s young. There's plenty of time. How's my young iend, Timmy ? "

Mrs. Logue went to bed, convinced that she had dis-overed Clodagh's secret. To begin again ? She couldn't ace it. Poor child ! The older woman's heart ached.

Next day, she had a long talk with the doctor. They arted, the best of friends, on a mutual understanding.

" After I've got her safely away," Sheila concluded ysteriously as they came out into the hall.

" Yes." He smiled, a shade grimly. " I shan't mince natters with Sir Ian. As regards that other plan, you an count on me to support you."

Back went Sheila to Clodagh's room.

" It's all settled ! "

Clodagh looked up.

" Does the doctor say I may go ? " Her eyes were ncredulous.

" As soon as you're a bit stronger. So now you've only ot to get well—well enough to stand the journey. Some-ning to look forward to." She stooped and kissed the eary face.

From that hour, Clodagh began to mend. A month ter, in Sheila's care, she was well enough to be moved Albrey.

Mrs. Logue had worked wonders. It hadn't been an sy fight. Ian, backed by his mother, had resisted the roposal. He was going to take his wife to the sea. But e doctor raised objections. Down air would be better r her after the mild West Country ; besides, every place the coast was crowded and absolute quiet was essential,

a difficult matter in an hotel. He voted for Albrey—and won.

"Such a pity," said Sheila, diplomatically, to Clodagh's husband, "that we haven't a second spare room. But you must come down, later on, to the inn for a few days. Have all your meals with us, of course. Meanwhile, don't worry! I shall keep you posted in the news."

They left him, stubborn and perplexed, on the doorstep of the Manor. Upstairs, at the linen-room window, a widow's cap made a white dot.

"Wave to her," whispered Sheila, "it's wiser!"

Clodagh waved.

Now, as she lay in the little room, so fresh and dainty, allotted to her in the Logues' quiet house, and the air from the open downs poured in, crisp and invigorating, stirring the roses arranged by Val with the sure touch of an artist on the table by her narrow bed, the old light returned to her eyes.

"It's like waking from a nightmare," she told Sheila. "I'm better already."

CHAPTER X

"I REALLY believe that the sky here is bigger than anywhere else," said Clodagh. She stretched out n arm and gathered a tiny scabious hiding in a tuft of rass.

They were lying on a ridge of the downs, the red oofs of Albrey below them.

"The air is so clear you can see farther," Sheila ex-lained lazily. "Besides, there's nothing to break the iew. I don't think now, I could live in any other lace! The cottage was only to be a stop-gap when e were first married, but here we are, old residents. al loves it, and so do I. We hardly ever go away."

"Not even abroad?" Clodagh wondered.

"No." Mrs. Logue laughed. "We're always plan-ing some wonderful journey, then Val begins to paint nd I get excited over the garden—or else Timmy develops umps! We once went as far as Capri and spent some olden weeks there, but that was before Timmy arrived. s I won't have a nurse, he keeps me busy. The war, oo, made it hopeless. Val was whipped in at the camp ear here for secretarial work. They wouldn't pass m for the Front, something a little wrong with his ngs." A faint shadow crossed her face. "Nothing uch," she added quickly, and reverted to the old pic. "Have you ever been to Italy?"

"No. I'm simply longing to travel, but I don't e any chance of it. England is 'good enough' for a." Her voice held a trace of mischief. "And by

'England' he means Keyn Magna. I suppose it' really a splendid thing that he's so satisfied with hi home?"

"For himself, yes." Sheila looked thoughtful.

They lay in silence for a span, watching the swee of the vast uplands where the summer clouds wer reflected in shadows. Here and there, on the gree folds shone a brilliant patch of yellow charlock, or th red of a host of poppies, like soldiers marching toward their camp, cut on the summit by Roman labour.

Sheila was studying the upturned face beside her, onc more that of the old Clodagh, with its clear colour an eager glance, its vivid interest in life. This time sh had "really recovered," the older woman decided, an felt proud of her share in the cure. But she wondere a little about the future. She broke the spell of drows peace:

"Have you nice neighbours at Keyn Magna?"

Clodagh started. She, too, had been absorbed i speculations, perplexed by a mood that vacillated betwee her love for her husband and the present sense of freedom

"A few, but I don't see much of them. I may, if hunt again this winter. But there's very little ente taining. People can't afford it now—not the sort people I care for—and there's no one near enough t drop in casually." She lifted her brows comically an added, "Except Cousin Tibby!"

"What is she like?" asked Sheila, amused.

"Well, try and imagine my mother-in-law dipped i water and badly wrung-out—no starch and no streamers There's a strong family resemblance, but Miss Mullens a tamer edition. I'm not surprised! She's kept in h place as a 'poor relation'—Lady Strangway sees to tha But she's really not a bad sort. I went to tea the one day when she was alone, and enjoyed it!" Clodag gave a youthful chuckle. "Cousin Tibby let herself g She was amazingly indiscreet. I learned all about th

arvellous ' training ' my mother-in-law so often alludes
. It seems that her parents kept an inn on the York-
ire moors. So no wonder she understands about
nen and how much sugar and rice to put out ! Ian's
ther stayed there one summer, fell in love with her
nd carried her off. Quite romantic ! Carried off
hœbe Mitton too, who was employed in the kitchen.
he became their general servant in Bristol where Ian
as born. They had three other children who died.
an was an afterthought when they were getting on in
ie world. Old Strangway's father came from Scotland.
le started with a small sweet-shop somewhere near the
ristol docks. His son had the brains and grit to make
ood on this slender foundation. I admire what I
ear of the old man. Success doesn't seem to have
oilt him. But of course he wasn't polished, and in
ose days the county people held aloof. I think it was
ostly his wife's fault. Still, all this will make you
derstand that there are no old friendships for me to
ep into at Keyn Magna. In a sense, I'm still on trial.
was just beginning to know people when I had my
st illness."

" Yes, you haven't had a chance. But you will now," heila consoled her. " Why don't you take to your usic again ? " She added quickly, " I mean the ano."

" I think I will." The girl wriggled up and stretched erself. " I believe I'm growing ! Can one grow after ie's married ? "

" Why not ? " Sheila was amused.

" You wouldn't like a little walk before we go home tea ? Just to get the growing-pains out of my leg ? " e laughed down into the other's face.

" No."

" Well, that's flat ! " She relapsed into her old nging position and began to practise exercises with right hand on her knee.

"It's a lesson," Sheila explained. "It's what you have to say to Ian when you're feeling over-tired. Sounds selfish, but it isn't. Not in the end. If you wear yourself out, you'll cease to be a companion to him. Can you get that into your little head?"

"I'll try. But it isn't easy. You haven't got a mother-in-law!"

"I had," said Sheila. "She did her best to keep Val from marrying me. So, in a way, I understand. But, apart from side-issues, it's bad for your husband if you always give way to him. He's inclined to be masterful already."

"He wasn't, the last time he came down here." Clodagh was quick in his defence. "He was awfully good and patient. He didn't even make a fuss when I wanted to stay another week. I think the doctor frightened him, something he said—I don't know what. But Ian told me they'd had a chat and I was to take life easy."

Sheila nodded and changed the subject.

"Have you heard from the Heriots lately?"

"No, I owe Aunt Helen a letter. I'm afraid she feels poor Uncle Edward's death acutely." For Mr. Heriot had passed away, very much as he had lived, calmly and unobtrusively, whilst Clodagh was still at Key Magna. "I must have her to stay with us. It's funny to think that in twenty-four hours I shall be back there again."

"It isn't 'funny' for me," said Sheila. "I shall miss you horribly."

"Oh, I didn't mean that! I *hate* going. You've both been such dears to me." She slipped an arm round her friend. "But you've promised to come to us for Christmas—all of you—and that helps. Timmy can ride the old pony. No bath-chairs for me now! I'm longing to get on a horse again. I don't think I've felt so fit for years, and it's all *your* doing. I can't thank you—properly—but please say you understand?

"I will, if you'll be a good girl and *keep* well, now you've the chance." Sheila turned her head, hearing a step behind her. "Here's Val! What has he done with Timmy?"

The artist heard her.

"Sold him to some gipsies whom we met on our way to the Windmill House." He threw himself down on the turf and looked at his wife mischievously. "He's going to become a little tinker. There are too many soldiers and sailors about, and he hasn't the slightest inclination to be a gentleman or a thief."

"You've left out 'tailor,'" laughed Clodagh.

"So I have. As a matter of fact, Cara begged that he might stay for a children's party they're giving to-morrow."

Cara was his wife's cousin. The Craiks lived some miles away and it was at their house that Sheila had first met Val. They had a son older than Timmy and a little girl, his dearest friends.

"But he's only got the clothes he stands up in!" Sheila stared at her husband, then gave way to helpless laughter. She knew so well what his answer would be.

"Clothes? You don't want clothes at his age. He's going to enjoy himself." He turned to Clodagh. "When I was a kid," he told her, "I loathed parties because my mother dressed me up. In a velvet suit with a lace collar. As if that wasn't bad enough, she used to tell me 'not to spoil it'!"

"But he hasn't a tooth-brush," Sheila put in.

"Well, for once, he must use a stick, like the Indians. I left him, in his glory, riding the pig. *He's* all right!" He twisted sideways and laid his head on his wife's lap. "Look at that white cloud in the sky? Like a frigate, its sails filled with the wind. Who was it wrote:

'Lying here a-dreaming with the song upon my lips,
Of the great sea of heaven and the shining stars like ships'?

But it should have been clouds. Stars are the lights that appear in the rigging when it's dark." He drew in a deep breath. "Lord, it's good here! I'm happy."

"But you're always happy," said Clodagh, her eyes a trifle wistful.

"Am I?" His came round to her face. "Well I've got the two best things in the world. Love and freedom. They're rare—together." He studied her silently for a moment. "Love's accidental, beyond our power, but freedom you can *make*."

"How?" Clodagh challenged him.

"Ah, that's difficult to explain. I don't mean freedom of action so much as freedom of the spirit. It comes from being true to oneself. To think clearly, reason things out, unbiased by stock opinions, and to be above criticism when we decide that a course is right. Never to worry what other people say of us. In the hackneyed phrase, to be 'captain of one's soul.' It's really respect for the individual—" He broke off, his brow furrowed and, gathering his courage, for he was shy, went on unfalteringly, "Look at your own case, for instance. If you were to model yourself on Lady Strangway's narrow pattern you'd lose your identity and become a shadow of her thoughts. That is, spiritually, a slave. You've got to live, and die, alone—it's the main principle of existence—and if you're going to help those you love you must be sure of yourself first. Otherwise you're blown about from one opinion to another, like a dead leaf in a gale."

"But it's difficult to know oneself." Clodagh was trying to follow his lead. "I mean, one changes, even in tastes. It's a sort of growth, just like the body."

"The fundamental things remain. Such as charity and a love of truth. Experience does the rest. The main thing is to encourage a sane reason, sufficient to balance our impulses. Then, when a crisis comes, to get outside the personal factor and look it straight between the

yes. If you can do this, you're armed against trouble nd, what is worse, vain regret." He stared for a moment t the sky and his face changed, unconsciously softened. I've reduced all creeds and doctrines to this: that od is within us and, if we can only stick to the truth, ontrol ourselves and think clearly, He becomes our nspiration. That being *our* belief "—he rubbed his cheek gainst his wife's hand where it lay on her lap—" we now ee that it's foolish to worry over Timmy's missing party uit! Don't we, beloved?"

"That's unfair." Sheila smiled down at him.

"Not at all—it's involved logic! We know that immy himself will be freer and happier in his old jersey nd knickers—although there's a patch on the seat—but e shouldn't like Cara to think that we didn't dress him roperly."

"That's one view, but there's another. We take a ride in our son."

"In his appearance?" asked Val. "Or in his comfort nd happiness?"

"One minute!" Sheila half-convinced, produced a st weapon of defence. "Aren't we rather proud of eing too big for social conventions?"

"I wonder?" He thought it through. "Yes, you're ght. There's a bit of that in it too. But it's healthy, can do no harm." He glanced across at the listening uest. "Do you and your husband squabble like ais?"

"No." She checked a sigh that rose to her lips and rprised her.

"You will, when you know each other better." Val ied to cover his mistake. "It only comes from years nagging!" His eyes wickedly sought his wife's.

"Get up and come in to tea!" she ordered.

"Why don't you smack him?" cried Clodagh.

Logue, already on his knees, presented his cheek to e girl, with a challenging gesture. The next moment

he was sitting back on his heels, grinning, and pretending to rub a smarting face.

"Why?" he demanded plaintively.

"Because I used my 'sane reason' and decided that you deserved it." She held out her hands to him, mischievous and unrepentant.

He pulled her up on to her feet.

"It's quite time you went back to your husband!" He stood for a moment and gazed at her; at the flushed, vivid face, the wind-blown mass of beautiful hair. "If I could paint you, just like that? No! You're my crowning failure. But, loving you, I forgive you!"

CHAPTER XI

IAN met Clodagh at the station. Before they had driven a mile, she detected a subtle difference in him. He seemed pathetically anxious to please her, even to ask for her opinion of the various schemes he had on hand. She felt a twinge of remorse in having stayed away so long and slipped her fingers into his.

"I'm *so* glad to be back," she told him, and added, "How is your mother keeping?"

"All right, I think. She's away at Whitby, with Cousin Tibby, while some whitewashing is done. She wanted to come to me, at the Manor, but I thought she needed a thorough change."

Clodagh repressed a smile; she saw through Ian's solicitude. But she was delighted at the news. She would have him entirely to herself.

"I've been very busy," he went on; "the almshouses are nearly finished. We're planning the gardens now and clearing up generally. I've been up in town ordering things. I shall want your help there by and by."

"In town?"

"No, here, getting it straight. Then we must have a sort of show for the villagers and open the place. The rector suggests a service, as it's a memorial affair, but I don't know." He was frowning. "The mater backs him up, but what I feel is the old man would have agreed with me that in these days, when there are so many monuments to the men who fought, it's rather over-

doing things. After all, he died peacefully in his bed and he'll be remembered by the inscription on the stones. The name too, 'Strangway's Rest.' Though he hadn't much rest in his life, poor old chap! He worked hard, to the end."

Clodagh nodded gravely.

"I'm always sorry I didn't know him."

Ian gave her a grateful glance.

"Well, if we decide against the service, you'll have to help me win over the mater. It's been a bit difficult. You're looking very fit," he added.

"I feel splendid. You can't think how good the Logues were to me."

She wondered if she had made a mistake, for she knew Ian's jealousy. To her surprise, he answered:

"Well, we must give them a good time when they come to us for Christmas. Nice people. I like them."

But the greatest surprise of all awaited her at the Manor.

"You must take off your hat for tea," he told her, his eyes dancing. "Come along!"

When he threw open the door of her room, she looked around her, amazed. All the heavy old furniture had vanished and in its place was a beautiful suite in light wood, painted with delicate wreaths of flowers; on the floor was a carpet that toned with the scheme instead of the well-worn Brussels one, and the huge bed had been replaced by a narrow pair, side by side, that matched the dressing-table and chairs.

"Oh, *Ian*!" She stood there, her eyes shining. No more would the room bring memories of pain and infinite weariness. It seemed to her a symbol of the new and happy life before her.

"Like it? It's to welcome you home. I didn't dare choose the stuff myself, so I whipped in Margot to help me."

"Margot?" Clodagh was surprised. "I didn't know

she had such good taste. It's *too* lovely! Thank you, darling."

He stooped to receive her kiss and went on rather hurriedly:

"She took me to a friend's shop. It's run by a Lady Somerby, who employs a lot of artists. Mostly women, so Margot told me."

"I've met Lady Somerby." Clodagh was darting round, admiring her new possessions. "You've had the room repapered too! *Doesn't* it look different?"

They went down, arm-in-arm, to tea in her sitting-room. There were flowers everywhere. She was touched by the evidences of her husband's thought for her.

"I'll make it up to him," she vowed. "I'm strong now; I can help him. And by and by we must have a child. We *must*, if it means lying up for weeks! I'll go through it. It's only fair."

Ian broke across this new-born resolution.

"Some letters for you." He gathered them up off the mantelpiece and placed them on the table before her as she began to pour out tea.

She glanced at them carelessly.

"One from Aunt Helen." She gave him his cup. "So you saw them in town. How are things going?"

Ian shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"My dear, you never knew such a muddle! Mrs. Heriot's perfectly hopeless. They're crippled by the death duties and they go to the lawyer for every detail! He's running up a fine bill." He drank his tea thirstily. "I suppose you know that Margot has let her flat and gone to live with her mother?"

"Yes—and doesn't like it," said Clodagh.

"I'm not surprised. A poky hole and the worst food I've ever tasted. Foreign meat, and everything skimped." Ian's voice was indignant. "And of course it's miles out, after living in St. James's. With no car, either. I

took the poor child to dinner one night and she told me all about it."

"Still, she chose it for them herself." Clodagh was thinking of her uncle and the pitiful change in his life. Ian made no response. "We must have them here on a visit. Between now and Christmas, if we can. Don't you think so?"

"M'yes," said Ian. "But if I were you, old lady, I'd ask them separately. I don't think they hit it off very well. Mrs. Heriot's changed, you know. Well, you'll notice it for yourself. Inclined to be sharp with Margot."

"Aunt Helen?" Clodagh's eyes widened. Without further comment she opened the letter and read it through, whilst Ian watched her.

Every page, covered by the shaky hand, breathed the same spirit of adoration and of weak submission to her daughter that Clodagh had witnessed in Lowndes Square. When she looked up, her face was sad.

"Poor Aunt Helen! She's very broken. She writes to ask if we could have Margot here. She's anxious about her; says she wants a thorough change, is losing weight. I suppose we must, though I should think it was Aunt Helen who needed it most."

"Oh, Margot's been pretty bad. Everything came on her shoulders, and she felt it awfully leaving her flat. Then one death on the top of another. Still, you know best." He stood up and moved, his back to the mantelpiece. "I've got to go up to town next week. If you liked, I could bring her back with me."

"Next week?" Clodagh felt cheated. This respite with Lady Strangway away, was not for long. Was Margot to break their cherished *tête-à-tête*? Still—she tried to think clearly—the Heriots were *her* relations. For years she had lived in their house and, since Ian did not mind the suggestion, it would be selfish to draw back. "All right." Her voice was a little jerky. She

added lightly, "I don't quite know how we shall amuse Margot. She doesn't care for the country."

"But she wants to come," said Ian.

The thought flashed across his wife that the invitation had already been offered and accepted. She frowned. It was so like Margot, Aunt Helen the unconscious cat's-paw!

"I believe you've been flirting with her?" she chaffed him.

For a moment, he looked annoyed.

"Why, you silly old thing. I didn't mean it!" She rose to her feet. "Let's go out? I'm dying to see the garden."

"Yes, come along," said Ian. "No good hanging about indoors. There's a new foal since you left. It's a beauty!" His voice warmed.

She wrote to her aunt the same night.

In due course, Margot arrived.

Clodagh had heard the hum of the car and was standing on the steps to receive her. Her arms went round the little figure, pathetic in its black garments. She felt a sudden touch of awe and of genuine admiration. For sorrow had added the last, fine stroke to her cousin's youthful beauty, toning down the voluptuous suggestion of her white skin and red-gold hair.

She was Venus mourning the death of Adonis, faint shadows round her eyes, the corners of the red lips drooping.

She hugged Clodagh.

"Oh, it's so nice to be here again! In this lovely big house." She gazed round the hall. "You don't know what it's like now, in that awful flat! I'm nearly dead."

"You poor child! Come to the fire." Clodagh led her to the drawing-room in which was a glow of burning logs. For the weather had turned chilly, with the first autumn frost. "Was it cold in town?" she asked Ian, following in their wake.

"No, but raining. Miles of slush."

"And Aunt Addy arrived this morning, weeping, because Tuppenny's dead. That seemed to make it all the wetter," Margot announced with a wan smile. "New chintzes?" She surveyed the room. "Everything so clean and pretty. You *are* a lucky old dear, aren't you?"

"I wasn't, a few months ago," Clodagh reminded her.

"Oh, well, if you *will* have—" She stopped abruptly recalling, too late, that the child hadn't lived. "I was to give you mother's love," she ran on hastily, "and to thank you for the gorgeous fruit." She settled herself in an arm-chair close to the table laid for tea and drew off her gloves. "Such apples! I love apples." She looked up at Ian, tall and handsome, warming his back at the fire, and smiled, her eyes mischievous. "If I had one now, I'd give it you. The Judgment of Paris —*and* Campden Hill!"

Clodagh was busy, pouring out the fragrant china tea. Ian bowed, caught up a dish and handed it to their guest.

"See what I give *you*?" he said.

"That's neat!" She took a slice of cake. "Who has been teaching you pretty speeches? Which reminds me"—she turned to her cousin—"I've got a confession to make. I led Ian into temptation, introduced him to Lady Somerby! The day we bought your furniture."

"It was well worth the risk," laughed Clodagh. "But is she Lady Somerby still? I thought she was going to be married."

"Oh, you mean to Nigel Weir? It didn't come off. A mystery! He's vanished—living somewhere abroad. Primula's running a shop now. Quite a success too. I'm thinking of joining her." She sipped her tea. "As a matter of fact, between ourselves, Lord Folkingham put up the money. He wants to marry her. But

Prim's wise, she clings to freedom. She has a jolly good time, you know."

"How odd about Nigel Weir." Clodagh had suddenly remembered the tense face of the man at the dance. "He was with her that night at Mrs. Molesworth's, wasn't he? Tall and dark."

"Yes, at that fatal dance!" Margot gave her a sly look. "When you 'wore a wreath of roses,' or something like it, to capture Ian. What ages ago it seems." The corners of her mouth drooped. "You and I—and poor old Arch." A slight pause followed the name; then she rattled on again. "His people have been hateful to me! But who on earth would have expected that his father would remarry? Disgusting, at his age! And then to go and have a baby. I call it the limit, don't you? As Edye says, he gives himself the airs of a *parent*!" She laughed then pouted. "Oh, I forgot that Ian was here. Bad for his young morals! Though I ought to be cured, living with mother."

"How is she?" asked Clodagh.

"Fair to moderate. The trouble is that she won't stir beyond the flat. But she always has hated walking, and taxis *are* so expensive." Margot sighed. "She's afraid of buses because she once saw one skid on Campden Hill! Still, I dragged her out to a concert last week—where, by the way, they played a symphony by Nigel Weir. It sounded rather Russian and mad, and Mother wept on my shoulder and then said that she'd enjoyed it. I didn't. It puzzled me. I like music I can remember."

"I'm with you there," said Ian. "But Clodagh says you've no ear."

His wife looked up, surprised.

"Ah, but she's a real artist," Margot explained daily. "She wouldn't condescend to sing 'Mon Homme,' for instance. Would you, old dear?"

"Why not?" came from Ian. "It's a ripping tune." He began to hum it under his breath. "I must get it for my gramophone, if there's a record out."

"There isn't. I asked." She turned to Clodagh. "The orchestra played it that night when Ian took pity on little me and gave me a heavenly dinner. Did he tell you? It saved my life. So in gratitude, as he liked the tune, I meant to present him with it. With your permission?" Her face was arch.

"You silly child!" Clodagh smiled.

"Ta! However it was napoo. So I bought the song instead. I can't sing, but that's a detail."

"You can! Anyhow you used to."

Margot shook her head.

"Do you remember Wensleydale? He said I 'warbled like a linnet'! I've never forgotten it. Sounds like water in a gas-pipe. And he was so angry when I laughed. Poor old Mick! I heard from him the other day. That awful wife of his is dead. Wensleydale"—she glanced at Ian—"belongs to my buried past."

"And you're thinking of resurrecting him?"

"I don't—know." Margot was pensive. "It would be such a disillusion if the years had brought him a bow-window or an accordion-pleated neck. I think I'll preserve my memories. Perhaps, too, he'd find me changed. I am, you know. It's awful to think that in four years I shall be thirty."

"Well, so shall I," said Ian.

"Then we'll weep together," announced Margot. She looked at Clodagh. "Is he comforting when you cry?"

"I don't cry—unless I'm ill!" A sudden picture flashed up before her: of a gate leading into a wood, a stranded car and herself, held against a tall figure, sobbing into a chauffeur's coat. Her eyes slipped to her husband's face. He was frowning, staring into space.

"Oh, you two!" mocked Margot.

He started at the sound of her voice.

"I say, have some more tea?" He came forward to take her cup.

"No, I finished long ago. I must go upstairs and unpack, or I shall never be dressed for dinner."

At the door, her arm round Clodagh's waist, she turned her head.

"I'll bring down that song," she told Ian.

His face brightened.

"Righto!"

She sang it to him that evening. Clodagh, sitting in the fire-light, watched her cousin, wondering. Was it courage, or indifference? She tried to be loyal and believe that Margot was acting for their amusement.

"Mon Homme"—there was a poignancy in the way the singer accented the words. With Archdale lying in his grave. And, four months later, her own father. Yet, at the end, her lips had quivered, and Clodagh felt a sudden relief. She rose impulsively.

"You're tired!" she said. "Don't sing any more. Come and sit by the fire."

Crossing the room, she laid a hand on the other's shoulder. Margot tilted her face and kissed her.

"I am, a bit. But it's so nice to be here and—oh, I can't explain! Throw things off for a little."

"I understand," said Clodagh gently.

In her graceful evening dress, the jet glittering as she moved, Margot drifted to the sofa.

"She's lovely!" thought Clodagh, all her artistic sense stirred by the contrast of dazzling skin in its sombre setting, the dimpled arms, soft young neck, and the ripple of her bright hair.

Said Margot, her slippers outstretched to the fire that gleamed upon the jet buckles and the high insteps in gossamer stockings:

"You mustn't think because I grumble that I'm not sympathetic with Mother. But it's all so difficult

at home. It's partly my own fault, I know. You see, I persuaded her to go in for the Coué cure. Anything as a distraction! I wish I hadn't thought of it. It's become an obsession. Well, Ian knows." She glanced at him and a flicker of mischief came into her eyes. "He saw it himself, the other night. She can talk of nothing else. First she says: 'I shall *never* get over your father's death'; the next moment she pulls out a string, with twenty knots in it, and begins to repeat: 'Each day, in every respect, I get better and better.'" Margot broke down in a ripple of laughter.

Ian, relieved, joined in.

"It's quite true," he told his wife. "I was utterly beat at first. Thought the old lady had turned R.C. and was devoutly telling her beads! Then she wanted me to try it for a touch of lumbago. She got quite short with me when I told her that all the faith I had was invested in Elliman's!"

Clodagh laughed heartily.

"Why twenty knots?" she asked Margot.

"Because you say it twenty times. You can guess how it gets upon my nerves. At nineteen I could shriek! Although it's only prescribed, like a pill, for night and morning, Mother's at it all day long. And she wants to cure every one; the woman in the next flat who, *entre nous*, drinks like a fish! She's a convert now—awfully pleased because Mother calls on her. If you ask me, I think she uses the knots for regulating her brandies and sodas! Then she reels in to embrace Mother, and they start a duet of 'better and better'!"

Clodagh wiped the tears of mirth from her eyes.

"It's too funny! Poor Aunt Helen. But *does* it help her?" she inquired.

"Well, it gives her something to do," said Margot.

CHAPTER XII

MARGOT stayed.

It was wonderful the way she settled into their quiet life. She resisted gaily all Ian's inducements to take up riding, and refused to go for walks in the damp, faithful to her high-heeled shoes; but she strolled about the grounds with the dogs or, when it was cold, smoked cigarettes in the warm houses, a box of chocolates by her side and the latest novel on her lap.

"It will keep off green-fly," she told the head gardener, a dour Scotchman, who thought the sight of a lady smoking was an insult to his plants.

He counted the precious clusters of grapes and suggested that moist heat "wasna guid for a buddy." Margot only laughed at him, and left nectarine stones behind her.

On fine days when her hosts hunted, she would drive to the meet and indulge in brief flirtations with the neighbours. The rector fell a prey to her charms, and begged her to take a Sunday school class.

"For boys?" he suggested, with a faint twinkle in his eyes.

Margot dimpled.

"Not even for boys! Too young for me; I can't enter into their thoughts. Now, *you* I can read like a book."

The rector went home digesting this. Unwisely he mentioned it to his wife. A mild and charitable woman, she startled him by her criticism, summed-up in a single word: "Minx!"

Lady Strangway shared her opinion. Mrs. Archdale was "no good." Another phrase she employed was, "a thorough Londoner." She had all the deep scorn of the provinces for the capital, ignoring the fact that its brains had been brought from every corner of the kingdom, including her own hardy North.

But Cousin Tibby was Margot's slave; a conquest deliberately undertaken when that frightened, unassuming creature admitted to prowess in dressmaking.

"I can cut out and fit with anyone," she told Margot in a flutter of pride, "though, of course, I'm only an *amateur*."

She laid such continual stress on the word that Clodagh guessed the source of her income before Ian's father had fetched her from Yorkshire, to include her in his pensioners. Even Lady Strangway admitted that Tibby was "good at her needle."

Margot put it to the test and found that it was no vain boast. They went into Bristol with an introduction from Ian to a wealthy silk merchant—an old friend of his parent's—and returned with beautiful materials, at wholesale price, Margot enchanted. She had decided it was time to think of her half-mourning.

"I shall make it up myself," she announced. "Though perhaps your maid would give me a hand with the sewing-machine occasionally?"

Clodagh willingly agreed and, as Margot had remarked later, "It's no good interfering with people who really *know* their business. Your maid's a treasure, and Cousin Tibby simply loves it!" She would stand for hours being fitted or poring over fashion plates.

Meanwhile Clodagh was contented. She had Ian to herself for all their outdoor pursuits and he had developed a strain of forbearance that stirred her wonder and gratitude. He did not expect her to be a man and a woman at the same time. He was not so aggressively possessive. Nor was he so demonstrative. Though she

id the fact, she missed the spontaneous caresses, the ager passion of early days. But she told herself they ere settling down. It was natural, and, besides this, hey had discussed the doctor's verdict. She played her art scrupulously. Life was going well with her. She as making friends in the country-side, for she rode traight, never gossiped and was unselfish, even in sport, trictly preserving the rules of the game. The elderly Iaster adored her. Unwittingly, he set the fashion.

She walked with the guns but did not shoot, presiding ith Margot over the lunches when the latter would ppear, dainty and sparkling, in the car. Clodagh was good hostess and Ian seemed proud of her.

Proud, but at times a shade depressed. He would ook at his wife wistfully, absent himself for a long walk r take a sudden interest in business and multiply his isits to Bristol.

"He wants a son," thought Clodagh. "Soon—but not ast yet. I'm going to obey the doctor's orders. There ust be no more failures."

Margot unexpectedly proved an ally in the unceasing ut silent warfare with Lady Strangway.

"Disagreeable old woman," was the visitor's summing-p. "She's jealous of you, that's the trouble! Has ad no education herself and resents it in her son's wife. ut I gave her a good talking-to yesterday. It was ther fun."

"No, how?" Clodagh was dressing, after her early de and bath, Margot perched on the nearest bed, a garette between her lips.

"Told her that Ian had been lucky in persuading you marry him; that lots of men were mad about you. aton, for instance!" Margot chuckled. "I showed r a notice in the *Times* of his maiden speech in the ouse of Lords." For this ancient admirer's expecta-ns had been realized by the death of his uncle. "I d," she ran on, "that you would have made an excellent

wife for him and that I couldn't understand how you had ever settled down to a humdrum, country life. She *bristled*! You should have seen her. But I think she went away impressed. It's the only way with a bully: to shout back, then they dry up. She's rather upset just now, over the loss of the linen-room key."

"Is it lost?" Clodagh's head emerged from the opening of her jumper. She drew it down over her lithe young body.

"It *was*," said Margot. She dived into her bag and produced it. "You can give it back to the old woman and tell her not to be so careless!"

Clodagh laughed.

"Where did you find it?"

"Don't ask inconvenient questions! She was called out of the room by 'dear Phœbe' and left it in the door. Then it walked off." Margot blew a ring neatly into the air. "Like that! I'm afraid the house is haunted." She slipped from the bed and laid the key on the dressing-table. "I'm off, to practise a billiard stroke. I must be in form for Ian to-night and take down *his* pride as well!" She pirouetted to the door; on the threshold she paused. "You ought to be very grateful to me. There's a new box of books from Harrods'."

"Good!" Clodagh fastened her watch upon her wrist, brushed her skirt, and was off to investigate the contents.

For now she had time for reading. Ian was giving Margot lessons in billiards every evening, after dinner. Clodagh would watch the commencement, then slip back to her own room, an easy chair and the latest book. In the silence of the house she could hear the click, click of the balls and sometimes, Ian's laugh. They were happy; they didn't need her. She was glad to be alone for a time, to satisfy that side of her nature which her husband never reached, the side that drew her to Valentine Logue, imaginative and intellectual. Eventually, the

ir would return, chaffing each other, the best of friends, d Margot would sip the glass of milk which she drank fore going up to bed, whilst Ian talked of the game his wife. This was the rule, though sometimes Clodagh uld furtively carry the book upstairs to finish by the ht of her fire. It could not disturb Ian, for of late he d slept in his dressing-room, preferring the wide old-shioned bed to the narrow one of painted wood.

" I'm afraid of falling out," he told her, " when I toss out. It wasn't built for a man of my weight. I'm t a sylph ! You don't mind, do you ? "

" Of course not."

Yet at moments she felt a little lonely. No longer uld she stretch out a hand to him across the narrow ace or peep in the early light at the big, fair man, eep, like a boy, his face pillowed on his arm. Her ve had strengthened, not diminished, in these happy nths of perfect health and she knew it to be a finer ve, less dependent on passion and admiration. He s hers, and she was making him happy, studying his stes and fancies, entering into his many pursuits.

Sometimes she was surprised herself by the way she d slipped into a groove, become a " staid married man," after her old thirst for adventure. What she led to understand was that this was dormant, not ad ; as dormant as her love of music. Never now did e think of her voice. That belonged to the old life. e could listen to Margot happily, with her " linnet " tes and gay songs, the popular " tunes " that Ian loved. e realized that her cousin brought a spirit of youth o the house, was an antidote to her mother-in-law's ritanic and mischievous influence. Therefore, one sty morning, when Margot came to her in tears, a ter crushed in her hand, and asked, between sobs, spairingly, " What is to become of me ? " she took the inty little creature on her knee with a genuine impulse pity.

"Nobody wants me," wailed Margot.

"What nonsense is this?" asked Clodagh. "Aren' you happy here?"

"Too happy!" sobbed Margot. "That's just it But Mother—Mother——" She broke down utterly.

Clodagh gave her time to recover, kissing the flushed wet cheek. Even in tears, Margot was pretty.

"She wants you back?" she suggested.

"No." The sufferer raised her head and looked a her cousin with streaming eyes. "She's let the flat Never thinks of consulting *me*! No home. You don' know what it is to be—all alone—and unwanted."

"Don't I?" thought Clodagh with a swift vision c her old life in Lowndes Square. But all she said was soothingly, "You're not unwanted. *We* want you, Ia and I."

"You mean that?" Margot's voice was breathless "But I've stayed such ages as it is."

"What does it matter? So long as you aren't bore with the country. Now, cheer up, and tell me exactl what Aunt Helen has said in her letter?"

Margot recovered quickly.

"She's accepted an offer for the flat—furnished. Sh wants to go and live with Aunt Addy for the rest of th winter. But I'm the trouble! She suggests taking room, somewhere near, for me in Richmond. And *won't*! Fancy being boxed up there with the Cou cure and Aunt Addy and the dreadful, dull people sh knows. And I haven't enough money now"—she choke —"to launch out on my own. You see, we spent it al and, when Arch died, there were only debts. After th War Office cut down its staff, he tried to work, but h wasn't lucky—never backed a single winner! And th time he got a commission on wine, the man didn't pa up!" She buried her face on Clodagh's shoulder an her voice emerged, muffled: "He wasn't always good me. It was like squeezing a rock to get any cash out

m! He simply couldn't understand when I had to ave a new frock. But Father was alive then and Mother ade him come to the rescue. I haven't even paid for y mourning! So it's—difficult to go back to town. here—now I've confessed my sins!" She sat up and ied her eyes.

"How much do you owe?" asked Clodagh.

"Oh, I couldn't tell you off-hand." Margot dimpled. No head for figures!"

"Well, find out." Her cousin refused to smile. "I've ot spent much of my allowance. I really don't need —Ian's so generous. Meanwhile, don't worry, old dear. here's always a corner for you here."

"You angel!" Margot hugged her. She heard a step utside on the flags and slipped from her cousin's knee. Here's Ian! Is my nose red?" Out came her powder-uff.

The door opened and he appeared.

"Hullo!" He stood there uncertainly, looking from s wife to Margot.

"It's all right," said Clodagh quickly. "But Margot's d a bit of a facer. Aunt Helen has let the flat and e's worrying where to go. So I suggested she should ay on here, anyhow over Christmas."

Ian nodded, his eyes averted. She was puzzled by his ck of response. He was fidgeting, twisting the cap in s hands. Was he tired of having Margot here? The ought flashed through Clodagh's mind. Then he spoke: "Of course." His voice was husky, and he coughed. If it isn't too dull for her."

"You've caught a cold," said his wife.

"No, it's smoking too much. I just looked in to tell u that Dinah's got five pups. You'd better not go ar her at present, but I thought you'd like to hear it."

"Oh, poor darling! I'm so glad."

"Yes. I've promised one to Peters. He sat up with r all night in the gun-room. I've just sent him to

the kitchen to ask Cook to find him some breakfast. He hasn't had time to get home yet." He glanced sideways at Margot. "Glad to hear you're not tired of us. You'll have to lick me at billiards now!"

He was gone before she could reply.

Margot turned to the nearest glass.

"I do look a sight!" Over her shoulder she said carelessly to Clodagh, "D'you think your husband likes my staying?"

"I'm sure of it." Her voice was hearty, for she felt embarrassed. "But Ian never gushes, you know. Besides he's wrapped up in Dinah."

From Margot came a mischievous laugh.

"Yes, he's a true Briton! First a horse, then a dog, and finally, if he has one, his wife. Still, he's rather an old dear." She wheeled round; her eyes were dancing. "Now I'll go and write to Mother and tell her she can let the flat. And that every day I 'feel better and better'! Shall we try the Coué cure on Ian and nip his cold in the bud?"

Only after she'd left the room did it occur to Clodagh that, according to this last speech, Aunt Helen had waited for Margot's answer before completing her arrangements. It would be more like the former—and you never could be sure of Margot! Still, she wasn't a bad little soul, with odd bursts of loyalty, as in her battle with Lady Strangway.

"I must go and find Ian," she thought. "I ought to have consulted him first. And there are the Logues expected too! All *my* friends! But I can't bear to think of the Heriots coming down in the world like this. Ian won't mind if I put it before him."

She searched the grounds in vain, however. At the stables she learnt from one of the men that Sir Ian had gone in the car to Bristol. Surprised, she returned to the house, and was met by the butler with a message. His master would not be back for lunch.

"He might have told me," thought Clodagh. "I do hope he's not sick of Margot?"

But there were no signs of this when, at dinner, he explained his absence.

"I found the barometer was falling. That means the frost will break. So I thought I'd get some business settled and be ready if there's hunting again. I hadn't much time, so I rushed off. Have you seen the pups?"

"I had a sly peep!" Clodagh confessed.

"I knew you would!" He smiled at her, then turned to the guest. "How very smart we are to-night! That's a new frock, isn't it?"

"Yes, home-made. I feel like the dove that flew out of the Ark! Grey's so middle-aged and peaceful. *I* don't need a sprig in my mouth!" She preened herself, like the bird in question. "Nice silk, isn't it? We got it from your dear old man with the whiskers and the Atlantic cable draped across his bow-window. He's a lamb—let me have it *so* cheap! I think he rather *liked* me," she added.

"You'd better be careful," laughed Clodagh. "He's been married three times already."

"Oh, is he a widower? Ian, *do* ask him over." Margot gave him a wicked glance. "Just think how heavenly it would be to have a new dress every week!"

"And a ready-made family—of ten children," suggested Ian. "He's in every sense a 'City father.'"

"Oh, the more the merrier," said Margot. "They could look after one another, the eldest one nurse the baby, whilst 'Joseph' and I skipped up to town. Wouldn't he look superb in the front row at the Gaiety? But the Opera would be more his style. I wonder if he wears the cable with a white waistcoat? I should think so. It's an emblem, as well as—a support! Aren't you glad, Ian, that you haven't to be 'supported'? Not *yet*." She was full of mischief. "Which reminds me—or rather it doesn't—it was town made me think of it.

Wensleydale writes this morning to know if I can recommend him a decent hotel in Clifton."

"For himself?" asked Clodagh, surprised.

Margot nodded.

"He says he wants a change of air."

She waited. Ian, aware of her gaze, looked up from a walnut which he was peeling.

"He'd better go to the *Clifton Down*."

He did not follow it up by suggesting that this friend should come over to Keyn Magna one day to see Margot, and Clodagh felt puzzled. For Ian was always hospitable.

"He doesn't like it," she thought. "It really is a bit soon for Margot to think of remarriage. I suppose that's why she's shed her mourning? I don't believe she loved Arch. Though clothes don't matter!" Aware of a silence, she broke it by asking what Major Wensleydale was like.

"Oh, very good-looking, or used to be. Slim and dark with Irish eyes and just the suspicion of a brogue." Margot smiled pensively. "A sportsman too. Ian would like him." There was mischief in her face.

Clodagh wondered if there were some hidden joke ignored by her between her husband and her cousin, for Ian gave a short laugh.

"Well, we must give him a day's shooting," he announced, and cracked another walnut. "Or hunting. Which would he prefer?"

"Oh, shooting, I think," said Margot demurely.

Her host's blue eyes challenged her.

"I can see through that! You'll be there at lunch." He added rather maliciously, "High heels and all, ripe for slaughter! Here's to the bag!" He raised his glass and drained it. "Now, I'm going to show you how billiards *should* be played! You'd better get out of that smart frock and into something sensible."

CHAPTER XIII

THE year was hastening on towards Christmas. Major Wensleydale had come and gone, but Clodagh did not meet the guest. On the day when he visited the Manor, she was kept in bed by doctor's orders for a neglected cold which had settled on her chest.

Ian returned from shooting in an unusual fit of ill-temper. So far as Clodagh could gather Margot had not fulfilled her rôle of hostess to his satisfaction.

"Oh, she looked after Wensleydale all right." Ian shrugged his broad shoulders. "But no one else. Mrs. Hartopp didn't like it."

"Still, you were there." Clodagh tried to soothe him.

"Yes, but I wasn't in form to-day. I shot simply rottenly and it put me off." He changed the subject. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." She fought with a spasm of coughing.

"Doesn't sound like it!" His frown deepened. "If you don't improve soon, I shall take you up to Town and have you thoroughly overhauled."

"Nonsense! It's only a cold." She smiled into his gloomy face. "So you missed me?"

Ian nodded, his blue eyes strangely wistful.

"You're a good wife," he said abruptly.

The rare praise brought a glow to her cheeks.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm a happy one!" As she coughed again she saw her husband's expression change, moodiness giving place to pain. With an effort she recovered her voice. "Don't worry, old dear. It's

nothing! You'll see, I shall be up and out in a couple of days."

But the prophecy was unfulfilled. For a week she kept to her room and emerged voiceless, a wan edition of herself. Lady Strangway called to inquire and to inflict an edged speech:

"I hope you don't take after your mother. You must be careful of your chest."

It was wonderful, thought Clodagh, how the old woman ferreted out information. How could she have learnt of Mrs. Laidlaw's sudden decline?

Through Margot and Cousin Tibby, of course! There were drawbacks to that friendship.

"It's only my throat," she told Lady Strangway. "It's never been really strong since I had diphtheria in France."

"You're too thin," said her ladyship. "You should eat more—drink milk. And, if I may be allowed to say so, ride less. It's not good for you."

Clodagh easily guessed her meaning. She drew herself up.

"Ian likes to have me with him."

"H'm!" Lady Strangway sniffed. "You must use your own judgment." Her beady eyes surveyed the rebel. "Your cousin is making a long visit?"

"As long as she likes," said Clodagh, annoyed.

Lady Strangway opened her mouth to speak, then closed it with a snap. Her face looked more pointed than ever, malicious yet secretly unhappy.

"Well, I never interfere." She rose to her feet, prepared to depart. "If I did, I should suggest your going away for a change—with Ian. To Weston-super-mare. Sea air would cure that cough. But I don't suppose you'll take my advice."

"I'll think it over," promised Clodagh.

"You'll be wise if you do," said Ian's mother.

There was real feeling in her voice. It puzzled Clodagh.

Then she decided that it was the old story, and the old reproach: her childless state.

"As if I were made simply for that!" she reasoned rebelliously. "I expect now she'll get at Ian and I shall have Weston-super-mare, with its wonderful air and its miles of mud, dinned into my ears all day! But Margot will back me up. What impertinence to ask how long she was staying."

However, the question of change of air never arose between them. It had been decided that the alms-houses should be opened on New Year's Eve with a dinner and dance for the tenants on the estate. Ian was absorbed in the details and Clodagh wrote the innumerable letters, confined to the house through a spell of bad weather.

There had been a great gale the night before, several fine old trees uprooted and a long strip of fencing, placed by Ian's father round the upper edge of a small quarry, carried bodily into the void.

They discussed the disaster after dinner in Clodagh's warm sanctum.

"A good riddance," Ian decided. "It was an eyesore, broke the view. But the old dad was obstinate. He called it a 'danger spot.' Absurd! What's the use of putting benches on the turf to look down over the valley and then to find when you're sitting there that you have to dodge those infernal rails? More like a sheep-pen! I'm glad it's gone."

"But is it safe without it?" asked Clodagh. "After dark, I mean?"

"Who is to go there after dark?"

"Lovers, of course!" Margot interposed gaily. "Two and two, holding each other's hot hands."

"Well, they can look after themselves," said Ian. He dismissed the subject. "I'm sorry the old oak's down. The cattle used to shelter beneath it, and it was the home of the brown owls. They've lived there for generations, had a nest in the hollow trunk. As a small boy I was

investigating this when I had the fright of my life. An owl flew out and bowled me over."

Clodagh laughed huskily.

"Like the child in the nursery rhyme."

"How hoarse you are," said Ian, frowning.

"I'm tired to-night. I shall go to bed early. That is, if you're playing billiards?"

"I feel more like taking the dogs for a run. It's quite clear now, and they've had no exercise." He glanced at Margot. "Just round the grounds and back again. What do you say?"

"It depends." She looked at her host teasingly. "If you'll keep to the paths, I *might* be persuaded! But the grass is soaking wet."

"All right. You can wear galoshes."

"What does that mean?" She was suspicious.

He smiled.

"Only the paths. I promise!"

"And I'm a witness," Clodagh announced. "So don't let the child catch cold." She moved to the window and lifted the blind. "Why, it's bright moonlight. How lovely! I wish I could come. I'm so tired of being boxed up."

"You mustn't," said Margot quickly. "Now, don't be a silly old thing! Go to bed and get well."

"All right; I'll be good." She picked up a book and settled herself near the lamp. "Half an hour's read and I'm off to my pillow."

"Then I'd better say good night now."

Ian stooped but she pushed him away.

"You're not to kiss me! I'm infectious." She pressed her cheek against his hand. "Good night, old man, and don't forget you're shooting to-morrow with the Hartopps."

"Not I!" He went out with Margot.

"I must get my fur coat," Clodagh heard her say, and Ian's response: "I'll hunt up your galoshes." Then

the door closed. She lay back in the deep chair and opened her book.

On the page before her was a coloured print: of Naples bathed in a sunset glow, with the sweep of the wonderful blue bay and, in the distance, the cone of Vesuvius, snowy against the evening sky. The whole picture breathed of peace and an almost fairy-like beauty.

"How I should love to travel," she thought, "but one can't have everything. I wish I could get rid of this cold? I know Ian is vexed about it. He hasn't been himself lately. I expect my dear old mother-in-law has been rubbing it in that I'm delicate!" Her eyes went back to the open page. She turned it regretfully, and began to read, for her promised half-hour.

At the end of it she was still absorbed when suddenly the telephone bell startled her. She sprang up and answered the call.

"Hullo? Yes? . . . I'm Lady Strangway. . . . Oh, how are you, Mr. Hartopp? . . . I'm afraid Ian's out. Can I take a message, or shall he ring up when he comes in?" She listened. "Right! I'll tell him. . . Oh, he never minds an early start. You can count on him. . . . Thanks, I'm much better. . . . Good-bye —my love to your wife."

She replaced the receiver and stood, for a moment, thinking over the change of plans. It would mean an earlier breakfast and the car ready, sharp, at eight. For the Hartopps were distant neighbours. Ian ought to know to-night.

She drew up the blind and looked out; there were no signs of the truants. The renewed temptation overwhelmed her.

"It can't hurt me. It's perfectly fine." She was off to fetch a heavy coat and wind a shawl round her head; then out she went into the moonlight.

She guessed the way they would return; round the shrubbery, by the path below that skirted the rock-

garden, through this, and up the steps connecting it with the higher level.

"I shall see them from the arbutus-walk," she decided.

Light and noiseless, in her galoshes, she passed down it.

At the end was an old summer-house, built in the form of a little temple, open on one side to the valley. The air was keen and she was not sorry when, quickening her steps, she reached this shelter. She leaned on the balustrade to recover her breath, her heart beating rapidly. For she was still weak from her cold.

Below her stretched the rock-garden, in terraces with winding paths of paving-stone and uneven steps. In the moonlight, with the sharp contrast of white boulders and black shadows, it had an uncanny look, like the ruins of some deserted city. She could see, from behind a leafless shrub, the muzzle of a dog, pointing, one paw raised, as it sniffed the air. It, too, looked carved in stone.

"Then they must be somewhere about," she decided.

She was just going to whistle to Dinah when she heard a stealthy movement below in the heavy shadow cast by the temple; the scrunch of a heel on the gritty pavement. Then, clearly, Margot's voice:

"You do love me?"

Clodagh clutched the cold stone of the balustrade. She could not believe her ears. It was some mistake—a joke perhaps? In an agony of growing doubt she waited for her husband's answer.

It seemed an eternity. Why didn't he speak? Already, deep down in her heart, she guessed the reason. Then, huskily—in that inarticulate, broken voice she remembered so well, the voice of passion—his words drifted up to her:

"You know—I do. I can't live without you—*now*."

Paralysed by the shock, Clodagh's brain refused to act. Her eyes, unconsciously fixed on the black shadow that splashed the paving-stones below, saw that the outline

ad shifted. There were two figures that emerged, waist igh, from the velvety mass.

Two? Now they were one. . . .

She turned and fled, like a creature possessed. Her oat, blown open by the wind, caught the leaves of the vergreens and a shower of raindrops scattered. She ould feel them, cold, about her, but she did not pause ill she reached the house. Once more in the quiet, grey oom, she sank, exhausted, on a chair and covered her ace with her hands as if to blot out the memory of Margot in her husband's arms. Ian and Margot—her wn cousin! The treachery was complete.

Suddenly, a new horror seized her. They would eturn! She could not face them. It seemed to her as f their guilt weighed upon her own shoulders. She was eaving the room when she thought of the Hartopps. hey mustn't guess. No one must guess! She scribbled he message on a sheet of paper and thrust it beneath he glass of milk standing ready for Margot. Then, in panic, she fled upstairs.

The firelight welcomed her. It played on the painted rniture with its delicate wreaths—Margot's choice! he clenched her hands, remembering this. Remember- ng, too, Lowndes Square and the dark little bedroom llotted to her. Once again she could hear Margot speak- ng, on the night when they had discussed Strangway, nd Clodagh, scornfully, had offered him to her cousin: Not a bad idea? Catch him on the rebound!"

She had done it—but *after* marriage. In those days hen Ian, with no companion, had resented his wife's eparture to Albrey, egged on by his mother to consider mself an ill-used man, Margot had met him and consoled m with her provocative wit and beauty. It was Mar- t's doing, from first to last. Clodagh felt murderous; ger was blurring the agony.

Ian too—whom she thought so strong—morally weak, thless, captured by the first brainless butterfly.

" I'm *glad* I haven't borne him a child ! To be like him and that wicked old rat." She said it aloud as she sat, cross-legged, before the fire, staring into the heart of the flames. " He isn't *worth* the pain I've suffered ! Well, he can have Margot ! I've done with them both—I'll cut adrift. Like Mother." Her face changed. She remembered the final tragedy of those disunited lives.

Then she heard Ian's step in the room beyond and caught her breath. He wouldn't come in, he had said good night ; but a nervous trembling seized her.

As she listened, in the silence of the house, the familiar sounds reached her ears ; the thud of his shoes as he kicked them off, the splash of water and, finally, the creak of the bed as it received him. Her anger melted slowly away, to be succeeded by infinite pain. She could see him now vividly, his head pillowed on his arm, the big, fair man, so dear and boyish, who had been so intimately hers.

A sob rose up into her throat. Ian faithless ? It couldn't be true. But, alas, it was ! She understood the change in him now, the wistful look she had surprised on his face of late. He pitied her and blamed himself, caught in the toils of this mad passion—infatuation, not love—for Margot, utterly unworthy.

" He'll find her out," thought Clodagh, " and that she only wants his money. She's shameless ; she would *like* a divorce ! To be mistress of the Manor. But she wouldn't stay in the country ; she'd insist on a flat in town. She couldn't share in his sports or be any sort of companion to him. He's blind, and he can't see it. And afterwards, it will be too late. Oh, *what* can I do ? " The tears streamed down.

She searched for her handkerchief and wiped them away, controlling her sobs, terrified in case he should hear her.

" I mustn't be a fool," she decided. " I must think things out—how I shall act. There'll be time enough to

ry later." With an effort she caught herself in hand. ' I believe that wicked old woman guessed when she sked me how long Margot was staying? And I never lreamt! I trusted him." She cried, from the depths of ier sex-rancour, " Can one ever trust men? "

Suddenly she thought of Logue; and of Sheila. Yes, here were exceptions. Back to her came a speech of is, his recipe for meeting trouble: Try to remove the ersonal factor. Get outside the case, and look it traight between the eyes. Then act on your own judg nent.

Something like that, though the words were hers.

" I'll try." She sat there, chin cupped in her hands, ummoning all her reason and logic.

How could she open Ian's eyes? Not by accusing Margot. She knew of old that opposition was only a pur in his headlong course. If it came to a scene and Margot left, Ian would go after her.

" But I can't pretend that I don't know, let things o on as they are." She shrank from the thought; it lled her with horror. " Even if I hold my tongue I hall have to find some excuse for getting Margot out f the place. Unless——" She drew a deep breath. Yes, I could go away myself. And leave them. Here, ogether? Oh, I *couldn't*!" It was wrung from her.

Yet there seemed no other alternative and again she aced the proposition.

To go away and leave Ian with Margot as his sole ompanion? Margot, who was afraid of horses, of a hunderstorm, of wetting her shoes! To deprive him of ie subtle excitement of stolen meetings and caresses. Margot, as hostess in Clodagh's place, neglecting the omen and elderly men; Margot to write his letters— hen she felt in the mood, not otherwise—to listen to is endless schemes, to use her tact at the tenants' dinner d be careful in her speech. Under the watchful eyes . his mother?

"Wouldn't there be rows?" thought Clodagh. "But how could I? She can't stay here alone with him, and he'd strike at Lady Strangway returning." She thought for a moment. "Aunt Helen? *She'd* come, like a shot! She's not happy at Richmond, and poor Aunt Addy's miserable. Yes, she'd do. And she'd never guess. She's as blind as a bat where Margot's concerned. And Ian likes her. He mightn't, perhaps, if she stayed too long!" For the first time, a mischievous impulse darted through her mood of despair. Then it settled again, blacker than ever. "I can't. It's wrong. It's encouraging sin. I *mustn't* leave them here together. Besides, what's to become of me? What excuse can I give?"

Her imagination rose to the test.

Health, of course. That tiresome cough. She could go up to Town, see a specialist and be ordered South without delay; tell him that Keyn Magna was damp, of her longing for the sunshine, and back it up by her mother's medical history.

Everything was working out. But was it right? And had she the courage?

She set her teeth.

"It's kill or cure—a desperate experiment. If they want to do wrong, I can't prevent them. I can't lock Ian up and, by the laws of the land, I can't divorce him unless he's cruel. Women in England are powerless in the face of infidelity. Unless a husband desires divorce and they agree to cheat the lawyers. But, then, he'd have to marry Margot. That's what I've got to save him from. She'd wreck his life as the Winterton woman wrecked Father's. I'm sure of that."

Long hours she sat there, thinking it out, thinking, too, of her dead parents; of their sacrifice to conventional ethics, their pride, their folly and their despair.

"I'm cured of divorce," she thought. "I'm going to act on my own judgment. The trouble is, can I hold out? It's damnable leaving him to her! But I can't

ee any other cure. He must find her out before it's too ate."

At last she rose, stiff and cramped, her mind made p, her plans in order, and moved across to the lamp hat stood on a table by her bed. The light shone down n a couple of novels and a Bible that had belonged to er mother. She covered it solemnly with her hand.

"O God," she prayed, "please help me. I'm trying o do the wisest thing and I hope it's right." Like a hild's, her eyes went up to the ceiling, as though, far bove the roof, the Almighty, compassionate, bent to sten. "Give me the strength to endure, and save Ian. t's going to be bitterly hard, but I vow I won't turn ack. I *believe* it's right." The last tears, unchecked, rickled down. "So, please, God, help me, for Jesus hrist's sake."

For a minute, she stood listening. From far away she ould hear the mournful note of a screech owl; the wind hispered in the chimney and a loosened strand of vy tapped against an upper window-pane. Again she ought of Logue's creed: "You've got to live and die lone and, if you're going to help those you love, you ust be sure of yourself first."

This then was a test of sureness—of judgment unbiased y worldly conventions?

She set her teeth.

"I'll see it through."

CHAPTER XIV

AT three o'clock the next afternoon Clodagh stood on Aunt Addy's doorstep.

Rivers answered the bell, her face glum. Mrs. Heriot was upstairs, asleep, Miss Desmond in the dining-room.

"Then I'll see her first," said Clodagh.

She was announced. Aunt Addy, surprised and delighted, rose from the table and a row of weekly accounts with which she was wrestling. The room was bitterly cold and the little old lady wore a coat.

"Why, Clodagh!" Her arms went round her niece. "Where have you come from?"

"Keyn Magna. I ran up for the day. How are you?" She hugged her aunt.

"Fairly well," said Miss Desmond, "except for my rheumatism."

"And sitting here, in an icy room!" Clodagh scolded. "You ought to know better."

"But Helen's upstairs." Aunt Addy sighed. "She always sleeps after lunch and if I move it disturbs her. I get the fidgets dreadfully. And the gas-stove has gone wrong! I didn't like to ask Rivers to light a fire in my bedroom. You see, there's a good deal to do now and your Aunt Helen doesn't *think*. She's been used to a large establishment. Sit down, my darling. You can't believe how pleased I am to see you."

Clodagh obeyed. Miss Desmond pushed the tradesmen's books aside and added involuntarily:

"It's dreadful what food still costs!"

Clodagh's brows came together.

"But doesn't Aunt Helen share expenses?"

Miss Desmond looked confused.

"Well, she *helps*. But it doesn't quite cover everything. One tries to be hospitable." The words, so simply uttered, came from her generous Irish soul.

"It's a shame!" said Clodagh hotly.

"Oh no, my dear. I'm glad to have her—come down in the world and all. My own sister. It's *right*."

Clodagh smiled and covered the thin hand with her own.

"Then you wouldn't be altogether sorry if I stole Aunt Helen for a time? I want her to come to Keyn Magna." She saw a sudden light of relief and incredulity spring up in the dimmed blue eyes surveying her, and went on rapidly. "I mean it. I'm going abroad, and can't leave Margot there alone. It will be—company for Ian."

Odd how the very name seemed changed, no longer natural on her lips.

"Abroad? Really?" Miss Desmond paused, her face anxious, for Clodagh was coughing. "You're ill! Oh, it's *not* your chest, darling?"

"No. You needn't worry." Clodagh smiled reassuringly. "My lungs are all right at present, but I've had a cold that I couldn't throw off, so I went to see a doctor this morning—came up by the early train—and he advised a dry climate. So I'm going to be wise and obey him, and if you will lend me Aunt Helen it will be a great help. Margot is the trouble." The hidden irony made her wince, but she steadied her expression. "I can't exactly turn her out, nor yet leave her alone at the Manor."

"You're not deceiving me?" wailed Aunt Addy. "You look so like your dear mother to-day."

"Do I?" Clodagh was surprised. "Anyhow, I'm perfectly sound. On my honour! Now, do you believe me? It's prevention instead of cure."

"Yes." Aunt Addy wiped her eyes.

"But I *must* shake off this cough," said Clodagh. "And Keyn Magna is damp in the winter. So hey for the Riviera! Or Italy, more likely. I want to make my plans at once and I know you will help me, dearest. So, may I borrow Aunt Helen?"

"Of course." Miss Desmond smiled. "As a matter of fact these last days I've been terribly worried." She lowered her voice. "Rivers wants to leave. It was a great shock to me. She doesn't care to maid Helen. So perhaps it's all for the best."

"Of course it is." For once, Clodagh accepted the ancient platitude. "She'll stay now—you'll see! So may I go up to Aunt Helen? I haven't much time to spare and I want her to come without delay. Then I'll run down for a last chat."

"Take care how you wake her," warned Aunt Addy. "She's sometimes a little inclined to resent it. The fact is, she's getting old. And old people have their ways." She drew up her thin form with an unconscious pride in the knowledge that she was three years her sister's junior.

Clodagh kissed her and made her way up the narrow staircase.

"That's over," she said to herself. "I think I carried it off all right. Now for the other!" She opened the door.

Before a glowing fire, Mrs. Heriot lay on the sofa asleep, Aunt Addy's shawl over her knees. Clodagh woke her, without scruple. The elderly lady stirred and blinked.

"Yes, it's Clodagh!" The intruder laughed. "Disturbing your forty winks. How are you, Aunt Helen?"

"I'm not getting on." Mrs. Heriot sighed. "I don't think Richmond agrees with me. Poor Addy means well but, between ourselves, I have a good deal to put up with here. Addy's afraid of her servants. A great mistake, as I tell her. But she's not as young as she used to be and,

sometimes, very *difficult*." She seemed to awaken suddenly to the fact that Clodagh's presence in the house was unusual. "Where have you come from? How is Margot?" Her face changed, became piteous. "Don't tell me there's anything wrong?"

"Nothing," said Clodagh quickly. "Margot is—enjoying herself." Her lips were bitter, but she smiled. "I'm the culprit. I have to go South."

"And you want to take Margot with you? Of course! A nice change for her. But you thought you ought to consult me first?" Mrs. Heriot was wideawake now, the speech deliberate in its intention.

"No, I'm afraid that wouldn't do. I have to think"—Clodagh paused—"of Ian." In a few words she described the position. "So you see, if you can come to the Manor, it won't upset Margot's plans."

"I *could*," said Mrs. Heriot vaguely.

"It would do you good," Clodagh urged her. "You'd have the car and some nice drives and spend Christmas together. I've an excellent housekeeper and she'd make you very comfortable. And a good cook," she added lightly.

Mrs. Heriot's eyes brightened.

"I'll think it over. About when?"

"As soon as you can. I'm off on Thursday." Clodagh began to cough.

"*Thursday?*" Mrs. Heriot started, and leaned forward eagerly. "But, my dear child, I'd quite forgotten! There's no need for you to worry, or to go abroad. None at all. You can be cured at home. It's quite simple, a question of faith." She was searching in her bag. "All you need is a piece of string. You tie twenty knots in it and every day you repeat——"

Clodagh interrupted her.

"I know. The Coué cure. But it's no good for me. The doctor was most emphatic; a thorough change and dry climate."

"Ah, *doctors*!" Aunt Helen sniffed. "They don't understand—or wish to! It's a death-blow to their profession." She added very solemnly, "God's cure, not man's. If your poor dear uncle had known of it—But it's no use going into that. It's simply done wonders for me. I'm a different creature! I never thought I could have survived all that terrible trouble. *And* the expense! But, as it is, I'm getting quite an appetite. Not that the food here is tempting, though poor Addy does her best. I suppose you would hardly credit it, but I've cured myself of corns? Not a nice subject, but still a *proof*. I've gone back to my old shoes—to 'Threes'—and it's all suggestion." She drew herself up on the sofa and winced. "That tiresome sciatica again! I must concentrate." She found the string and began solemnly, "'Each day, in every way, I feel better and better.' It's *going*!"

Clodagh's lips twitched, but she managed to control her voice.

"You'll be able to cure Cousin Tibby," she suggested diplomatically. "She's a martyr to neuralgia. That is, if you come to the Manor."

"Probably." Mrs. Heriot smiled. "I've had one wonderful case already. That of a poor woman in the flat next to ours. Not *quite* a lady, you know, and Margot didn't care for her. Still I don't believe in class distinctions when it comes to a question of religion. One must be broad in one's sympathies. She was a terrible sufferer. Neurasthenia, helped by air-raids. The porter's wife told me, in confidence, that she was quite off her head at times—thought nothing of breaking the furniture! You've no idea how it calmed her." She added inconsequently, "I've heard of your husband's cousin—Miss Mullet."

"Mullens," corrected Clodagh.

"Yes, that's it—some name like that. Margot described her in a letter. The dear child has been friendly

o her. Though she doesn't like Lady Strangway. Your nother-in-law, I mean. Rather a *peculiar* person." Mrs. Heriot sniffed and arranged the beautiful rings on her fingers. "I feel very sorry for Ian, so kind and good, with a mother like that. I would do all I could for Miss Mullet." She sighed, and was off again, pleased with an unexpected audience: "Your marriage has been a great success. I'm always so glad I brought you together. Yes, you have me to thank for that, though, sometimes, you weren't easy to guide. Now, of course, you're no longer a child, more sensible, in every way. I wish Margot had listened to me." Her voice grew querulous. "Not a good match and Arch didn't understand her. Though the poor darling was very brave. Of course this is quite between ourselves. So jealous—without any cause for it! And *mean*. Not like your dear Ian. So good of him to help Margot. Of course he's a very rich man, but it isn't every one who would be so generous. A great relief to my mind to feel that those bills are settled. And Margot, the dear thoughtful child, sent me a little present too. I'm hoping now, that something will come of her friendship with Major Vensleydale. He was really devoted, poor man, and his wife such a trial! It shows one should always have *faith* and everything will come right in the end."

Clodagh listened, speechless. She had paid a large dress bill for Margot out of her own slender allowance. Yet, all the time—— She clenched her hands. And Ian had kept his actions secret. But Mrs. Heriot was speaking again:

"How is Margot looking?"

Clodagh, with an effort, replied:

"Very well." She could not resist adding, "She has gone out of mourning, you know."

"Not really?" Mrs. Heriot stared, but at once began to find excuses. "Of course, in the country; and black gets so rusty." She stroked her own widow's

costume. "Though I thought she looked perfectly lovely in it. Still grey, and especially mauve, should suit her."

"Well, you'll see for yourself." Clodagh glanced at the clock. "On Wednesday then. We may expect you?"

"But that's the day after to-morrow?" Mrs. Heriot's eyes were scared.

"Aunt Addy will help you pack. I can't leave Margot alone there and she doesn't care for Lady Strangway. One has to think of village gossip." She rose to her feet. "Can I tell Ian that it's settled?"

Mrs. Heriot feebly protested but, in the end, gave way. Down went Clodagh to find Aunt Addy.

"It's done! She's coming to me on Wednesday."

"Oh, my dear!" Miss Desmond beamed. "It's very wrong of me to be glad, but perhaps, now, Rivers——" Her lip quivered. "I couldn't bear it! To lose her, after Tuppenny. You don't know how I miss him. Helen thinks me ridiculous! But he was so fond of me, and so *faithful*."

A lump rose in Clodagh's throat. She tried to sympathize, choked, and was saved by a fit of coughing.

"I don't like the sound of that." Aunt Addy watched her, helpless. "And you look so white and strained. You're telling me the truth, darling?"

"I am. It's bronchial—nothing more."

"Why doesn't Ian go with you?" Miss Desmond risked the question. She was inwardly perplexed. Her instinct told her that something was wrong.

"He can't. He's up to his eyes in business. There's this memorial to his father finished at last; the almshouses. They're to be opened on New Year's Day and all the people are invited. Oh, here's Rivers!" She welcomed that worthy, who appeared with a tray laid for tea.

"I thought you'd like a cup," said Aunt Addy.

"You think of every one," said Clodagh. "Except ourself!" She turned to the other. "She isn't ooking a bit well. Don't you agree with me, Rivers?"

"She's doing too much," said the old maid grimly.

"Well, she'll have a rest next week. Mrs. Heriot is oming to me, on a long visit," Clodagh announced. The cups on the tray rattled. Rivers abandoned her ignity.

"Going?" The word was rapped out.

"On Wednesday." Clodagh smiled. "So you'll have unt Addy all to yourself and be able to nurse her up." Her eyes met those of the faithful maid's, a question in heir hazel depths.

"If she lets me," observed Rivers. Her mouth ightened, but in her eyes was an unholy gleam of triumph. I wasn't engaged as a lady's maid. I know what I now, but I don't brush hair. It was her or me." Her oice was crisp. "And since *she's* going, I'll stay." he straightened a tea-spoon rigidly and, in the same nemotional manner, added, "If your aunt *wants* me, iss—m'lady."

"Oh, Rivers!" Miss Desmond held out her hand. The maid's obstinate pride broke down. She clutched ne thin fingers convulsively.

"I shouldn't have gone anyhow. *There!*" She epped back and resumed her old repressed and severe ppearance. "So now, mum, drink your tea—it's erishing in here—and I'll put a match to your bedroom re."

A bell rang through the house. It was followed by the und of a voice, complaining at the top of the stairs:

"Rivers! Rivers! Where *are* you?"

The three conspirators glanced at each other and odagh laughed. Rivers, retreating, nodded grimly. ; she opened the door they heard her mutter: "Lost handkerchief, I suppose?" Then, in her most nified manner, she replied from the passage:

"Coming, madam. *My mistress* was wanting me."

"A character!" Miss Demond wiped her eyes. "But, oh, my dear, it's such a relief. I couldn't live without Rivers. When I'm ill, she nurses me like an angel. Helen says that I'm weak with her, that I let her rule me and the house. What she doesn't really understand is that it's a rule of love. She's devoted, under her stormy manner, and that's really all that counts. That and perfect honesty."

"Yes, you're lucky," said Clodagh.

Part III

NIGEL WEIR

"Il ne suffit pas d'aimer les gens, il faut les aimer comme ils veulent qu'on les aime."

VICTOR CHERBULIEZ.

CHAPTER XV

CLODAGH was resting under a palm-tree in the Villa Nazionale watching the sun dip down over the astel dell' Ovo and the rapid transformation of translucent ue water into the colours of an opal. No less magical as the sky, that glowed like metal in the furnace and emed to pulsate as though unseen hands were busy at e mighty bellows.

But Naples seemed unreal to her ; a phantasm of beauty d light that would pass and reveal the grey English ouds to match her burden of despair. Even the leaves the huge palm, gently stirring above her head, with its opical suggestion, failed to convince her that at last she d realized her cherished dream.

For here was no peace of body or soul. Behind her she uld hear the fierce cries of the Jehus, as they urged on eir harassed little horses, straining under the high harness ith its silver angel, its bells and feathers, the crack of the hips like pistol-shots, and all the feverish, squalid hubbub the noisiest city in the South. Never before had she lt so intolerably lonely, so far removed from the actual ene, so indifferent to life and beauty. In spirit she was Keyn Magna on a cold moonlit night watching the adows of Ian and Margot merge on the stones of that ck-garden which had proved her Gethsemane.

Already, from the sea, the first chilly breath of night le across the sun-warmed sand, and Clodagh instinc-ely drew up her furs round her throat. With a touch of old courage, she told herself that this apathy of hope-

lessness was the reaction from the strain and hurry of her departure. Looking back, it seemed amazing how every obstacle to her scheme had vanished before the power of her will. She had carried it through, without breaking down. Not even in the long journey had she found relief in tears. Dry-eyed, in the darkness, she had seen the magical glow of Vesuvius, like a bonfire suspended in mid-heaven from the windows of the train ; dry-eyed, she had wrestled with porters and cabs, to arrive, alone, at the big hotel, dine and finally seek her bed.

Capri had been her destination, but the languor that had fallen on her, in this first week of incredible sunshine, seemed to have paralysed her actions. If only it could have stopped her from thinking of the past as well as the present, she would have been content to stay in Naples for the term of her self-imposed exile. But already she was experiencing the human desire to flee from sorrow, and a new-born restlessness, as unlike her old love of adventure as the fanciful vision drawn from the book read upon that fateful night compared with the real Naples before her.

She was hardly aware that her health had responded quickly to her changed surroundings. The warmth, the life in the open and the light, dry air had cured her cough. Nature was secretly at work building up the weakened tissues, but powerless to heal the soul. It seemed to Clodagh that life was over. Even faith had deserted her. She had left Ian unprotected to Margot's enchantment ; and Margot would win, since she had no scruples and Ian was weak. Yes, weak—" Hector tamer of horses " ! Clodagh's lips curled bitterly.

She was roused from her black forebodings by the clanking approach of two Carabinieri, gorgeous in their uniform—cocked hat, sword on hip—with the conscious pride of police officials in a city notorious for its crimes ; fine-looking men with dark skins, black eyes and moustaches and the graceful Southern carriage. They gave her

a careless glance as they passed, slightly contemptuous. Another mad young Englishwoman alone and defying local conventions? Unless the elderly gentleman on the seat a few yards down were an inconspicuous chaperon. They glanced at him too, and continued their beat.

"It's time I was getting back," thought Clodagh and suddenly felt too tired for action.

She had spent the day before at Pompeii, tramping in the hot hours through the lava dust under burning sunshine, intrigued by the silence and mystery of that ancient city raised from the dead, peopling the ruins with ghosts from the past and touched by the relics so intimate and revealing of their home life. Pagans, with a sure knowledge of form and colour, now dust themselves, but amazingly alive in their works. For a brief span she had yielded to the thought made concrete around her, but, with her return to Naples, the impulse had passed and the love of adventure. There was no escape from her present problem; the wisdom or folly of her flight.

Suddenly she became aware of a shadow interposed between her and the amethystine sky and sea, and of a whining, insistent voice. A loathsome beggar stood before her, bent on a crutch, demanding alms.

"No, *niente!*" She waved him away.

But he continued his pattering entreaty and began to unwind a dirty bandage round the calf of his leg, where the tattered trouser was rolled at the knee. To her infinite disgust he disclosed, with an air of pride, a festering sore.

She shrank back, and his manner changed. Standing on his sound limb, he grasped the crutch with his right hand, his evil face menacing.

For a moment Clodagh felt frightened; then her nerve returned. She sat there, silent, holding her bag tightly, conscious that the beggar's eyes were fixed on it.

To her relief she became aware of a stranger hurrying towards them. It was the elderly gentleman who had

occupied the farther seat. He spoke rapidly in Italian and made a swift gesture in the air. The beggar gave him one venomous glance, then shuffled off, still muttering.

Clodagh looked at her rescuer. She recognized him at once; the pointed beard with its white tip, the finely-marked, worn face, the unmistakably foreign cut of his clothes and soft, wide-brimmed hat. It was her neighbour at table in the dining-room of the hotel.

"Thank you," she said falteringly in Italian, and repeated it, for her knowledge of the language was slender.

To her surprise, he responded in English:

"You were wise to give him nothing. If you had shown any money he would probably have snatched your purse. Beggars are the curse of Naples. That is, to foreigners. The natives know how to deal with them."

"But how?" asked Clodagh, interested.

"By a simple gesture." He smiled at her, glancing down at the space beside her. "Will you allow me to sit here for a moment and explain what I mean? Unless I am detaining you?"

It was said with a foreign courtesy, although his pronunciation was perfect.

"Do, please." She made room for him.

He raised his hat, bowed and obeyed her.

"It is easy to learn. With the hand, like this." He repeated the slight sweep in the air of his fingers, ivory with age. "That is quite sufficient. They understand. It is better not to speak to them. Will you try it?"

She imitated him, under his watchful, dark eyes.

"Excellent! Don't overdo it. Just the turn of the wrist—so!" He paused for a moment and continued, "Would you think it impertinent of me to give you another piece of advice? I have been anxious to warn you, observing that you were alone. I mean, of course, at the hotel where we are both staying. Naples is not a safe place for a lady unprotected."

"Really?" Her face was incredulous. "In what ay? Please say what you like. It is very kind of ou."

"Then, if you value my opinion—and I've lived in the outh for thirty years—you should not walk about alone earing any jewellery that is obvious and valuable. Such that wrist-watch, for instance. It is not safe. There as been a case recently of an Englishwoman whose r-rings were torn out of her ears, brutally, the lobe nt, in a little street off the Chiaia. Yes, in broad aylight too. You must remember," he went on, "that is is not Tuscany or Rome. Here you have the scum of e Mediterranean, a mixed and vicious population, the escendants of Saracens and pirates. Naples is a hot- d of crime. If it were not for the golden sunshine it ould be revealed as such. Only the colour and light save ." He saw that she listened, unconvinced, and went on, ill more gravely, "Courage is not a matter of running nnecessary risks. In Naples, believe me, the police are genuine protection. They resent the trouble laid on em by impulsive foreigners. Our race particularly." e smiled as he noticed her eyes widen. "Yes, I'm nglish, albeit somewhat Italianized by long residence in e country."

"Of course." She coloured, aware of her error.

"And thoroughly respectable!" A twinkle lit his oughtful eyes. "The two things should go together, *n è vero?* Likewise 'old enough to be your father.' ou see, I'm remembering my native speech? But, sting apart, do be warned by me. You are young, urageous and attractive. I mean it, with all respect. herefore you arouse attention. I implore you to be wise. know Naples—and I loathe it!"

"Yet you've lived here for thirty years?" Impul- vely she voiced her thought.

"Heaven forbid! I live on an island."

"Capri?" She jumped to the conclusion. "Oh, do

tell me about it? I'm thinking of going there myself."

"Are you?" He smiled indulgently. "A pleasant place, but not my home. I should find its round of gaiety exhausting! That is, compared to my hermitage. On Siris. Miles away"—he made a vague gesture towards the west—"a rock that some Cyclops cast in the middle of the wine-coloured sea."

"How lovely it sounds!" Clodagh sighed, then started as the sharp crack of a whip echoed behind the palm-tree. "Out of all this noise and dust."

Her companion nodded.

"A green island, blessed by a lake. A place of rest and forgetfulness, where the peasants toil among the vines unmoved by the glamour and greed of cities, and Nature gloriously survives man's hideous attempts at civilization."

"Siris?" Clodagh repeated the name. "It doesn't sound Italian to me."

"It was a part of Magna Græcia. There is a legend to the effect that Pythagoras found shelter there when driven out of Crotona. Some ruins remain which they call his Villa, but they look to me purely Roman. I should doubt the story. Possibly they confuse the spot with the ancient Siris on the Gulf of Taranto, an early Ionian settlement. Still, we cling to our fables. It is a land where one exists in the past, a past peopled by gods and heroes. It appeals to a dreamer like myself. I live in a Villa by the sea at Siris Marina which faces south with nothing between me and Africa save the miles of blue water. One can breathe there." He smiled at Clodagh.

A little shiver ran across her and he stood up.

"You're catching cold. The sun has set and it's getting chilly. May I find you a carriage, or are you walking?"

At her request, he hailed a Jehu.

Her foot on the step, she hesitated.

"Can I give you a lift?" she asked her new friend.

"Thank you, no." He directed the driver.

Clodagh held out her hand.

"I shall remember your warning," she said. "Thank you so much. I'm going to be prudent."

He kissed her glove in Italian fashion, and smiled back. "The gods protect you! And especially Minerva." Raising his hat, he moved off.

As they rocked down the dusty road, the little horses cantering, the driver erect on his feet, flourishing his noisy whip, Clodagh leaned back and thought of the strange, unconventional conversation. One phrase was echoing in her mind: "a place of rest and forgetfulness."

Could she "forget" on Siris? The island sounded enchanting. But how was she to reach the place?

"I'll make him tell me," she decided; "waylay him to-night after dinner. What a charming, courteous old man! And I took him for an Italian, with his olive skin and blue-black hair streaked with grey—such a lovely colour—toning down to his white-tipped beard. His eyes too, with that twinkle in them. How Val would like to paint him! Those long hands with the filbert nails. He might be a painter himself, or a poet? I begin to feel grateful to the beggar. It was nice to speak to some one again. I shall certainly try to get to Siris."

That evening, for the first time, she took pains with her appearance, choosing a soft, grey dress that had been new in the summer. It evoked a stinging memory: of Margot in her half-mourning and her subtle allusions to Wensleydale. Clodagh realized that her cousin had used this ancient admirer to arouse Ian's jealousy. She recalled his reluctance when Margot had fished for an invitation for the former to spend a day at the Manor. All the little crooked pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of intrigue were slowly fitting into place. Her heart hardened against her husband.

Resentment had added a flush to her cheek as she entered the long dining-room. She was conscious of admiring glances which accentuated her scorn of men. They did not look for character but only superficial beauty;

a woman who fitted herself to their tastes and became the shadow of their desires. To be used, and then cast aside. For a fresh face and the spice of contrast that appealed to their jaded senses. Her eyes were so full of her secret disdain that the waiter, a susceptible Roman, scuttled off to fetch her soup. Here was one who must be obeyed!

Her table was in a little recess formed by a pair of pillars, with, beyond it, the one allotted to her elderly compatriot. He came in, shortly after her, bowed, and called for the wine-waiter. This gave her the excuse she needed. She leaned across the narrow space.

"I'm going to beg for some further advice. I don't understand the wines of the country. I've only dared Chianti so far and I'm getting rather tired of it. Is there by chance a wine of Siris?"

He responded with alacrity, gave the order and watched the man fill the glass at her elbow.

"I won't guarantee," he told her, "that this is made on my island, but it's the same brand, well-matured. You can taste the flavour of the grape."

They talked at intervals during dinner and he left the room in her wake. When they reached the lounge, she turned to him.

"Would you care to have coffee with me?" she asked. Her voice was abrupt; she was slightly nervous.

Divining this, he set her at ease:

"I was just mustering my courage to propose that you should honour me."

Clodagh laughed.

"We shall have to toss up!"

To her amusement he drew a coin from his pocket and spun it neatly.

"Heads!" she cried, and a head it was.

"Then I'll owe you a cup if ever you come to Siris," he told her, and added rather gravely, "Though I don't advise a visit."

"Why not? Isn't it healthy?" she asked.

" For the body, yes. There's no malaria, although it's a scourge on the mainland. But—you may smile at this—the island has a curious spell. Remember, I went there for a month and remained thirty years. Not that it mattered in my case, but you are young. Your life lies before you. You have no need of a lotus-land."

" I might have. You can't judge." A shadow fell on her vivid face. " Besides, I'm not as young as I look. I was 24 last August."

His dark eyes scrutinized her.

" What is age? The years of the body. I should judge your soul to be centuries old. That is why when you suffer you feel it so acutely, like probing an ancient wound; those past lives of struggling upwards and paying for forgotten errors. It is only the very young souls who live lightly and cheat sorrow, and they never know the ineffable moment of peace and glory that come to one purified by sacrifice. For pain is the fire through which we must pass before we approach the borders of peace. And higher than pain is renunciation, the giving that ends the strife of free will." He paused. " Is this all Greek to you?"

" Not altogether." She was thinking. " You believe, then, in reincarnation? "

" I do. To me, it's the only reasonable solution to the mystery of inequalities of birth, and the fact that so many righteous men are misunderstood and cruelly treated in their journey through this world. It explains how a wise Creator can permit war and other forms of barbarism; why the prayers of the faithful are unanswered, and the innocent suffer for parents' sin." He checked himself, aware that the waiter was advancing with the coffee to the two chairs where they sat in a corner by the window. " You will let me order you a liqueur? "

" Only in Siris," she laughed back.

" As you wish, Signora." He was amused.

" My name is Strangway—Lady Strangway."

He bowed.

"And mine, Horace Edge." He watched her pour out the coffee. "Are you, by any chance, an artist?"

"No." She looked up, surprised at the question, and passed his cup across to him. "Why?"

"I was judging by the shape of your hands. You would have made a good sculptor. Love of form, artistic perception, and rhythm—ah, I have it! Music."

"A clever guess. I used to sing." She changed the subject rather quickly, already afraid of his intuition. "Tell me how I get to Siris, and if there is a decent hotel?"

"I shall tell you nothing." His eyes twinkled.

"Don't you think it's very greedy to keep it all to yourself?" she coaxed.

"No, not unless there's a good reason for leading the young astray." He sipped his coffee, frowning a little. "I feel that Siris is dangerous for you. Believe me, I'm a wise old hermit. It has nothing to do with a selfish motive. On the contrary"—his face grew wistful—"there isn't a single Englishwoman on the island, and, besides myself, only one Englishman. It would be a sincere pleasure to talk in my own language to some one with your education, apart from my intercourse with the peasants. But, despite your very aged soul, you're too young and too brilliant to risk losing your hold on life."

"But that's just——" Clodagh stopped abruptly, on the brink of a confession. A little confused, she began again, with a change of voice, indescribably youthful and attractive, "Now, look here!"

"I'm looking," said Edge. "I never resist an innocent pleasure." His face was mischievous and indulgent. "Yes, you know you're a pleasure to look at and especially for an old exile. I picture English woods in the spring, rippling brooks and the freshness of dawn. That is why I feel sure that in my next incarnation I shall be born in a happier sphere for overcoming the present temptation! You won't reach Siris without help, and mine I refuse to give you."

CHAPTER XVI

NEVERTHELESS, she discovered the island. Not without difficulties that included a tedious wait at Salerno for the only boat that touched at Siris once a week on its way to the mainland and returned there for the night on its homeward journey south.

She had not seen Mr. Edge again, but had found in her room, on the day following their conversation, some beautiful flowers with his card. Eagerly she read the address, Villa Tre Santi, Siris Marina, and the short message on the back. "To wish you farewell with regret, and to remind you that Virgil placed the gates of the Infernal Regions conveniently near to Naples!"

On board the ill-kept and crowded boat, she scrutinized the passengers, hoping for a glimpse of her friend, but without success. The sea was rough, a strong wind blowing from the east and, once outside the sheltered harbour, Clodagh had reason to be thankful for the fact that she was a good sailor. Hours passed. As the sun went down, she became aware of a dim shape in the form of a massive turret that rose above the monotonous stretch of troubled waters. Cold, hungry and disgusted by the unpleasant sights around her of peasants prostrated by the swell, she gazed eagerly ahead as the steamer circled the lonely island.

Through the gathering dusk she could see a hill that rose in terraces of vineyards and orange groves to a flattened eminence, as if a giant had playfully sliced off the top of his breakfast egg, held in a cup of volcanic rocks.

" Is it Siris ? " she asked a sailor, who threw her back a gruff " *Sicuro !* " with a command that sounded like an oath. For there would be no shore leave to-night. It was too rough for the steamer to risk an approach to the *molo*.

In response to the shrill note of the siren, a pair of boats put off to meet them, and Clodagh, with other passengers, was bundled into one of these. She found herself tightly wedged between a peasant, breathing garlic and clasping a basket containing ducks, and a fat priest who groaned aloud as they dipped and rose in the trough of the waves. The luggage was hurled in after them, with the mail-bags and a weird assortment of unwieldy articles ; cavernous bottles in wicker covers, hampers, a saddle, some bales of cloth and, to cap everything, a hobbled goat that butted vindictively at their legs despite the efforts of a crone calling shrilly on the Madonna and grasping the rope around its neck.

The fisherman, standing to his oars and facing the prow, began to row. Occasionally they shipped water and the passengers cursed or invoked the saints, according to temperament and sex, whilst the goat bleated, the ducks quacked and the oars groaned in the rowlocks.

" ' An island of peace and forgetfulness,' " thought Clodagh mid-way between laughter and tears. " If only the priest isn't sick I shall just hold out until we land ! "

Eventually she found herself, giddy and soaked with salt water, standing on the stone pier, still clinging to her dressing-case and watching her trunk narrowly escape an immersion in transit. There was no sign of a conveyance and, at her demand for one, she was surrounded by a knot of interested advisers, all talking together in a dialect unknown to her.

At last the priest, recovering, took command ot the situation. She gathered that he was inquiring for which villa she was bound. At the word " hotel," he shook his head and substituted " *albergo*."

Clodagh nodded helplessly. Immediately a stalwart man heaved her trunk upon his back and, despite her protest, made off with it. In despair, she was starting after him when the priest authoritatively checked her. The procession formed. Once again she found herself between the peasant with the ducks and her clerical adviser.

They tramped up the road skirting the beach, past fishermen's dwellings where nets were hanging to dry from unglazed upper windows, past a tavern dark as a cave where in the feeble glow of a stove she could see men seated at little tables, drinking, playing dominoes and cards, like some dim Dutch interior; past open doorways where women sprawled, combing their children's tangled locks, or a brief glimpse was afforded her of an old hag bent over her cooking; onwards and ever upwards, to turn at last a sharp corner where the road doubled back for a fresh ascent.

Here they met a flock of goats, driven by a wild-looking shepherd, returning from the pastures above. Her trunk with its carrier had vanished from sight and he looked anxiously at the priest.

"Patience, my daughter," he told her gravely and paused to mop his pallid brow with a dirty, yellow handkerchief.

The ancient crone with the goats passed them, amazingly active, a basket strapped to her bent shoulders, and was swallowed up in the shadows cast by a row of cypresses. The procession was tailing off, drifting into the scattered dwellings, though a group of small urchins still pursued them, inquisitive but in awe of the priest. On they went in the deepening darkness.

"It's exactly like a page from Chaucer," Clodagh decided. "Some pilgrimage—a penitent with her confessor! I suppose I shall sleep *somewhere*, but I wish my shoes weren't full of water."

The road took another bend. Here were houses like

those she had seen on the slope of Vesuvius, flat-roofed and in concrete, washed a delicate ochre or pink, the upper floor living-rooms, the basement devoted to storage or, in some cases, forming a stable. From one of these came the sound of a solitary donkey, braying. The peasant wished them both good night and dived under a crumbling archway. At last their road was crossed by another and, facing the dusty open space, Clodagh saw, against the rock, where tufts of white heath and rosemary found a precarious footing, an inn with an arbour of trellis-work covered by vines, and a score of seats and little tables framing the entrance. Over this was a board, bearing the legend: ALBERGO DEL SOLE, with the added lure, *Frutta di mare.*

"We are here." The panting priest halted.

They passed between the groups of men, drinking and talking on the threshold and crowding the dark little bar behind, and into a kitchen, low-roofed, with an earthen floor and long table, lit by a lamp hung from the rafters.

Blinking in the sudden glare, the first thing that Clodagh saw was her trunk and, on the bench beside it, the carrier, finishing his bottle. He sprang up and welcomed her with voluble speech and lively gestures, rubbing his broad shoulders and emphasizing the weight of the burden. Clodagh, relieved, was quite willing to overpay him.

Meanwhile the priest had advanced to the farther end of the long room where a woman was busily engaged with a row of pots on a charcoal stove. Watching her, was a very old man in a night-cap who turned his head from time to time to sniff the air, like a hungry dog, and beat on the arms of his chair with claw-like hands, his lips mumbling. A lanky girl, barefooted, with a wonderful mass of piled black hair above her shrewd olive face, ceased from her work of drying plates, to stare at Clodagh, apparently hypnotized by her hat.

"Three generations," the latter decided, interested in the scene and stifling her qualms when she thought of the food.

The *padrona* listened to the priest respectfully and came forward to receive Clodagh's halting request for accommodation for the night.

"*Si, si.*" Her dark eyes were bright and kindly. They darted back to her cooking-pots, and the priest solemnly took his departure with a gesture of benediction as Clodagh tried to thank him.

The *padrona*, with a shrill command to her daughter to watch over the dinner, called a man from the bar who shouldered the trunk, then led the way up a rickety staircase. She showed Clodagh into a low, bare room with a bed, a chair and a small chest that served as a wash-stand with the simple addition of a basin. A spotted mirror that hung from a nail near the window was the only remaining touch. The trunk was bumped down by the barman and Clodagh gave him a generous tip, to receive, for the first time in the South, a grateful acknowledgment. Had she understood the dialect, the form it took would have amused her:

"May you be as fortunate as you are beautiful, Signora!"

She was thankful when the pair left her and she could hunt for some dry stockings. Her first impulse was to examine the bed. The rough sheets and mattress were clean and so was the stone floor, though innocent of any carpet.

"Well," she thought, "this *is* an adventure!"

As soon as she had changed her clothes, she went across to the window. Beyond was a world of deep blue shadows where the dark line of cypresses stood out in silhouette. She could catch a glimpse of the sea below them, a uniform colour with the sky in which no stars had yet appeared. The air blew in, sweet and spiced with the salt tang of the east wind, mixed with a faint

scent of orange-blossom and rosemary. With it came to her a curious sense of space and freedom. The bare room, with the faint odour of the polish used on the smooth flags, recalled forgotten memories of her early days in France and the first joys of independence. She did not analyse her sensations, but she felt that in some miraculous way she had escaped from a cage.

"I like it," she decided. Locking her trunk carefully, she made her way downstairs.

In her absence, a cloth had been thrown over one end of the long table and a place laid for her, far removed from where three men, already seated and waiting for dinner, were engaged in conversation, their knives and forks on the bare board.

The *padrona* motioned her to the place of honour and Clodagh obediently settled herself. Presently a basin of thick soup was placed before her with a hunch of greyish bread, and a man with a baize apron appeared and dumped down two big bottles by the side of her coarse tumbler. They were both uncorked, and she hesitated. Finally, she tried the white wine and found it, to her surprise, as good as the one at the Naples hotel. The soup too, was well-favoured, of pumpkin and tomatoes mixed, but the bread, made without yeast, proved somewhat of a trial. The next course was new to her a *fritto misto*, served, sizzling, from the pan. She diagnosed the contents as brains, liver and artichokes, well-fried in sweet oil. She was hungry and enjoyed it, amazed at the simple but excellent fare, comparing it favourably to the kind of meal she would have found in some lonely inn in her own country.

The other guests ate in silence and averted their eyes when she glanced at them, but she could divine their curiosity, more restrained than in the case of stragglers from the bar beyond, who took their stand in the doorway to gaze at her, whisper, and laugh. Once a stout, ruddy man whom she guessed to be the landlord, appeared

and, clapping his hand on the ring-leader's shoulder, forced him back with a jovial remark which seemed to arouse his companions' mirth. Later, with the final dish—a slab of cheese, two oranges and a handful of pine kernels, all heaped on the plate together—he returned, bearing a bottle of Marsala and glasses tucked between his fingers. He served the other guests with this at their request, then advanced to Clodagh's side, bowed, made her a little speech in the dialect and, finally, filled up a wine-glass to the brim. Smiling, he offered it to her.

Although she could not understand him, she guessed from his attitude that it was a gratuitous attention. The *padrona*, too, was nodding emphatically.

A sudden spirit of mischief seized her. She took the glass, raised it, her eyes on the kindly pair and smiling back, drank a toast to the house.

"Al Albergo del Sole! Buonissimo!"

An immense success! From the doorway, she could hear a murmur of approval. It seemed to Clodagh a fitting moment to withdraw from the company.

In the seclusion of her room, she sat on the bed and gave way to her mirth.

"I wonder what they think I am? A commercial traveller, of course! Something in the feminine line. Corsets?" She shook with laughter. "In long trays in my trunk—which accounts for its size! I only wish Ian could——" Down came the guillotine of bitter remembrance, slicing off the natural finale, "see me now!" She was caught back into the cage.

Nevertheless, she slept that night, the result of the long sea journey, and awoke to find brilliant sunshine pouring into the bare room and to hear the note of tinkling bells.

She jumped out of bed, threw on her coat and went eagerly to the window.

The flock of goats was returning from their stable in

the valley. They halted in front of the inn and the *padrona* came out with a blue bowl into which they were milked. Clodagh watched the scene, enchanted by the vivid colour. Brown and piebald, the restless creatures moved against the ochre dust of the little square, with its dark screen of cypresses, under a sky of pure cobalt. The goatherd, with his wild face, bare feet and tattered cloak, suggested to her some Syrian shepherd transplanted from biblical history. The dusty palms, the rocks that thrust their points above the sandy soil and the silvery note of the olives all heightened the impression, together with the burning sunshine. Far away, she could see the immense, unbroken stretch of water, sapphire, streaked with emerald, smooth as a mirror reflecting the heavens—for the wind had dropped in the night. The air was so clear that she heard the shuffle of hoofs and the snorting breath of goats nosing among the tufts of rosemary on the farther bank, with ever the deep and hollow tolling of the rusty bells attached to their collars.

As she leaned out, the heavy plait of her dark hair fell forward and the movement caught the landlady's eyes.

"Buon giorno, Signora!" she cried. "I bring the coffee now! As soon as the milk boils."

Clodagh breakfasted; none too well, for the bread seemed more sodden than ever and the butter a scant allowance.

"I must buy some in the town," she decided. "Bread too, if there's any better."

With the help of the spotted mirror, she was finally dressed, and she went downstairs. The lanky girl stared open-mouthed at her knitted frock and shady hat in the same tone of cornflower blue. They were the simplest clothes she possessed but, in Siris, remarkable. She found the *padrona* at the door, giving orders to her husband who was driving off for the day's supplies.

Clodagh, after greeting the latter, paused to examine the little cart and the powerful mule in the shafts, with crimson tassels at its ears and a bridle fringed with the same bright wool. The conveyance, however, a mere box, set on high, ornate wheels, was more engrossing.

The four panels were roughly painted in glowing colours with biblical scenes: King David receiving the Queen of Sheba; Jonah, dressed like an acrobat, issuing from the mouth of the whale—a surprised whale, Clodagh decided; some Saint with a dazzling halo, and, at the rear of the cart, a huge shell heaped up with the spoils of the sea.

"Bellissimo!" she told the owner watching her interested progress.

He nodded proudly, made a large gesture towards the interior in which were no seats but a narrow shelf for the driver, and broke into voluble speech.

She gathered at length, with his wife's assistance, that he was offering her a lift to the market held at Siris Fontana.

She accepted gladly. Here was a way of getting to know the locality. She wondered if she was expected to sit on the floor of the cart among the empty provision baskets, but the landlord fetched a kitchen chair and this was planted behind his perch. Clodagh scrambled up and settled herself on her novel throne.

Off they went, with a clatter of bells tied to the gaudy harness and a crack of the whip, up the hill. Every now and then, the landlord would turn to mark some point of interest. Once, as they swept round a sharp curve, she could see, far below, a fine Villa, with gardens stretching to the sea and a tiny harbour formed by two piers, in the shelter of which lay a steam yacht.

"The *Inglese* at Tre Santi," her voluble companion informed her.

So that was the home of Horace Edge, and the yacht his means of escape from the dirt and discomfort of the steamer. One mystery was explained!

The road was full of interest to her, with its fellow-travellers bound for market; vigorous young peasant-women with baskets poised on their head containing cheese and dairy produce, moving lightly and gracefully, as though the burden formed a part of their shining black *coiffure*, with nothing but a roll of linen to keep it balanced in position; carts as gaudy as her own, the family closely packed on chairs, behind them a pile of fruit, green stuff, or the huge bottles in wicker-work cases, that contained olive oil; fishermen swinging up the slope with the sunshine drawing silvery gleams from the iridescent scales of fish fresh from the nets, in the wonderful colours that cast into shade the red mullet of northern waters.

Once they passed a primitive hand-cart piled with mussels and other shell-fish.

"Frutta di mare," said her host.

So that was the meaning of "Fruits of the sea"? How picturesque it all was, even to the sonorous language! Clodagh, clinging to the edge of the panel representing Jonah, gave herself up to the delight of the moving spectacle.

At last they came to the steepest climb and she saw, above her, huge old walls that formed a rampart, with gaps in the rough formation of stone built into the natural rock where trees and bushes had rooted themselves. A crumbling arch, the depth of the structure, spanned the road and they entered its shadow, to emerge upon a totally different scene.

Behind them had been, like a giant staircase, a series of cultured terraces: vineyards, orange and lemon groves, and orchards filled with olive and ilex. Now these gave place to huddled houses, one on top of the other, the windows gay with the strings of washing hung out to dry, tattered and gaudy garments turned by the sun into gay bunting. The doorsteps and side-paths were crowded with townsfolk, gossiping or making

heir way to the market on the higher level, and the raffic became congested. The mule, straining at the iarness, its long ears back, its flanks sweating, brought hem slowly to a square with a big church brooding above t, a town hall with a campanile and rows of narrow, ow-roofed shops. The centre of the *largo*—for the ancient iames persisted in Siris, with *vico* in the place of *via* —was filled with stalls containing produce and, at one nd, a herded mass of goats with their kids and live oultry. It was an amazingly vivid picture of primitive ife, and, everywhere, rose the hubbub of voices extolling heir wares, purchasing or bargaining, of bells and the ries of animals.

Already at this early hour the cafés were doing a brisk rade and, on the steps of the church, the beggars had hosen the shady side, to extort alms from the women vho passed in with their baskets for a brief moment of rayer before the day's work began. In front of the hurch, the landlord halted and flies gathered about the iule. He waved his whip towards the building with hat faint irreverence which the male Italian delights to xhibit as a proof of his socialism.

"Santa Maria del Rosario," he informed Clodagh, yet ot without pride. "Will it suit the Signora to step own here?"

She agreed, with a sudden consciousness that this stepping down" would not be easy.

Flinging the reins on the mule's back, he lowered him- elf to the ground—then held out his arms to her!

It was done so naturally, with no change in his jovial xpression, that Clodagh drew a deep breath and resigned erself to the situation. For everywhere in the *largo* men vere bundling out their women in the same homely fashion.

"Grazia molto," she gasped as, a little flushed, she elt the pavement under her feet.

She heard a soft chuckle behind her and, turning, ound herself gazing up into Horace Edge's dark eyes!

CHAPTER XVII

"WELL!" His smile was mischievous above the pointed, white-tipped beard. Over her head he nodded, in friendly fashion, to her driver.

"Oh, do thank him for me," begged Clodagh.

"For a lift, or a lift down?" he queried, and added apologetically, "I assure you it was most graceful, and quite the correct procedure."

With a few words he dismissed her host, who scrambled back to his perch and, cracking his whip, joined in the warning cries as he forced his way through the crowd.

Clodagh stood there looking at Edge and appreciating the change in him. He wore a suit of some creamy material, rough and loose-fitting, that suited his lean, vigorous frame, a weather-beaten, shady felt and the rope-soled shoes of the natives. A tie in golden-brown bandanna added a note of mellow colour. Unconsciously his fingers went up to straighten it and Clodagh realized her silence.

"You see, I've arrived, without help!" She screwed up her eyes in the glare that beat back from the church steps.

"Then come into the shade," said Edge, "or you'll be having sunstroke next!"

They moved on, side by side, to a café with a bright awning. Edge paused on the threshold.

"I suggest a *vermouth* or *limonata* as an excuse for sitting down and hearing all your adventures," he told her.

"Then something teetotal, please," she begged when they found seats at a quiet table. "I drank quite enough last night of the seductive wines of Siris!"

"May one ask where?" He was amused.

"At the Albergo del Sole." Clodagh's voice was demure.

"My dear child!" His hands went up in one of his quick, foreign gestures. "Forgive me for calling you that—I'm only half-civilized—but you take my breath away. You don't mean to tell me you're staying there?"

"Yes. I sit at the head of the table and when I drink my host's health there is loud cheering from the bar!" Her hazel eyes were dancing under the brim of her cornflower hat. "The only detail I dislike is bread that makes me think of putty. Still, I may get used to it. If you only knew how glad I was to get off that dirty steamer and find a place where I could sleep!"

She poured out her experiences. Edge listened with an occasional chuckle.

"A fortunate thing you met the *parroco*—the parish priest of Siris Marina. Not half a bad chap, though washing isn't his strong point! Still, he might have brought you to the town. I suppose he was tired himself, or perhaps prejudiced locally, in favour of the *Sole*. They're honest people, I'll say that."

"I don't blame the priest," laughed Clodagh. "I blame you. You might have warned me!"

"I never thought you'd really come." He looked at her admiringly. "Still, now you're here and my conscience is salved, I may say that I'm delighted, and I hope you'll be kind enough to look on me as a friend in any further difficulty. Why didn't you send for me last night?"

"Pride!" Clodagh sipped her lemon squash. "Perhaps a vestige of vanity. You should have seen me when I arrived. The goat looked smart in comparison!

Is it possible, do you think, to find an inn with a bath-room ? "

" No." Edge shook his head. " But wherever you go they can bring you a tub of fresh salt water daily, if you're afraid to bathe. By midday, the sea is quite warm. Of course at the Villa—" He hesitated. " I'm alone there, that's the difficulty. I should love to have you as a guest."

" How kind you are ! But I shouldn't dream of it. Still, there must be some sort of hotel here." She gazed out on the vivid scene.

" I'm afraid they're both third-rate," said Edge. " We are quite out of the track of tourists, and the visitors are generally bagmen from the mainland or agriculturists. I could find you rooms, perhaps, at some Villa. Or—" He broke off frowning as the church clock chimed the hour. " It's annoying," he resumed, " to-day I'm lunching with a neighbour and there's a council later on which I'm bound to attend. Do you think you could stand the *Sole* for one night more ? Then I'd make inquiries. And, to-morrow, will you lunch with me ? "

" I should love to," Clodagh responded. " And I certainly shan't leave my kind hosts for a day or two. There's no hurry." She rose from her chair. " I mustn't keep you. Anyhow, I adore Siris." She quoted his words, " ' One can breathe here ! ' "

" Yes, it's like being on board a liner, and at this time of the year the sirocco is a rare infliction." He paid the waiter. " I hate to leave you. What are you going to do with yourself ? "

" Explore ! "

The word came out with youthful gusto, and Edge smiled.

" Well, you're safer doing it here than in Naples. There's seldom a crime on the island. The criminal can't get away ! It's easy to watch one boat a week and there's no place of refuge handy. Even if your purse is

stolen you have only to tell the parish priest and he announces the fact from the pulpit. Yes, truly," he added as she laughed. "With the assurance that if the culprit brings it to him all will be well, under the seal of confession! Generally, it works. Where almost every one is poor it's difficult to spend money without exciting undue attention." He held out his hand. "To-morrow then, for that cup of coffee which I owe you?"

"But how do I get to your Villa?" asked Clodagh.

"I'll come and fetch you. I've a painted cart too, with a tandem of donkeys. You'll be amused. But comfort yourself—it has a step!"

"And you call yourself a hermit! With every form of luxury." Her face was brimming over with mischief.

"Well, I wear the monastic habit, or anyhow the cloth," he retorted, touching the sleeve of his coat. "I get it from the mainland, in a bale. I'll present you with some, if you like. *A riverderla*, Signora." He lifted his hat, then paused again. "If you mean to lunch in the town, go to Luigi's and say I sent you. The Ristorante del Rosario. It's straight up the hill, in a turning to the left, the Vico Mezzomonte." He was off, with a parting wave of the hand.

Clodagh, left to herself, wandered happily round the market, bought a crooked blue and white jar in Abruzzi ware and a bunch of carnations and freesias to fill it; found a baker's, but no yeast bread, and consoled herself with fresh butter which, wrapped in vine leaves, she laid in the cool depths of her first purchase. She decided to leave the church for a wet day—if it ever rained in Iris—and she followed the main road up the hill.

Here and there, she could see evidences of older structures, more solid than the concrete houses with their flat Eastern roofs, sometimes enhanced by a cupola in the case of a more imposing Villa. She pictured the town as a place of refuge, impregnable with its massive walls, in the days of invasion from the sea by Saracens

and Barbary Corsairs. Into this stronghold the people would pour when the church bells rang out the alarm, driving their flocks before them, whilst their farms and crops went down in flames. That they had the priceless gift of water was evident when she crossed a bridge over a milk-white, foaming stream where laundresses knelt on boulders by a tank through which the current poured.

She stood there, for a moment, watching them beat the linen on the flat soapy stone, and nibbled a fig that she had bought, with others, from a peasant's basket. An old man, passing, smiled at her and audibly praised her "beautiful teeth!" She nodded back, her heart warmed by the simple friendliness of the natives.

"Vico Mezzomonte?" she asked him. "*Dovè?*"

He pointed up the hill, and extended four fingers, with a gesture towards the west.

After a little walk, she found it, a narrow alley between walls, the steep incline helped out by shallow, well-worn steps. At the head of it, blocking further progress, was an ochre-coloured house with a balcony projecting over the entrance and a board on which, in fantastic lettering, was transcribed: "Ristorante del Rosario" with, beneath this, "Luigi Rezzoni."

But once inside the dark little hall it looked so like a private Villa that she paused uncertainly. Through an open door at the end, she could hear a man's mellow voice. Her eyes widened in amazement, for the owner was singing lustily, "Way down in Alabama."

Intrigued, she explored farther and saw a small but spotless kitchen, white-tiled, with copper pans gleaming from their hooks on the wall, and a *chef*, in his linen cap and coat, busy at a cooking-range.

He heard her step and wheeled round.

"Buon giorno, Signora!" He wiped his hands on a towel and advanced, his shrewd, dark face wreathed in smiles as his eyes ran over her. "In whatta way can I serve you?"

It was so unexpected that Clodagh laughed.

"Mr. Edge told me to come here for lunch," she explained. "But he didn't say that you were"—she risked it, smiling—"American?"

"Italian, a native of Siris." He bowed. "But I ave live' for fourteen year' in Noo Yoruk. I was secon' *chef* in a grreat 'otel." He drew himself up, still smiling. 'I 'ave also been in ze employ of ze Crown Prince of Greece. *Sissignora*, I 'ave travel'. *Ma, che vuole?*" He threw out his hands. "My 'eart, it is 'ere, and I return once I 'ave pile' ze dollars."

"I don't wonder." Clodagh smiled. "Siris is a lovely place."

"*Si, si.*" He shrugged his shoulders. "I am 'appy. 'ave my wife an' ze babies." His bright face clouded over. "But still I am waste'! In Noo Yoruk zere is nderstandin' for an artist like Luigi. 'Ere, *no*!" He hecked himself. "Forgive me, Signora, I keep you tandin'. You wish for lunch? *Bene!* For *you*"—is white teeth flashed out—"Luigi will do 'is best."

Clodagh, immensely amused by his open look of dmiration, asked when and where the meal would be erved.

"*Pronto!* And upstair', Signora. My wife, she will how you. But firs' ze menu. Ah, if I 'ad but guess' he was comin'! *Ecco!* To-day, zere is Gnocchi—zis ternal *pasta* zey demand! We will 'ave an omelet. n' fish stew' in white wine wiz mussels; zen quails n aspic, a salad, fruit and coffee. 'Ow's zat?"

"It's a banquet!" said Clodagh.

"Ze Signora is please' to 'ave 'er joke. For she now better. *Scusi!*" He passed her and called in is rich voice, giving each syllable its value, "Teresina! eresina!"

A woman appeared, plainly-clad and still young, with owing eyes in her pale, olive face and beautifully-shaped nds and feet. Clodagh realized that here was the true

Madonna type beloved by the Old Masters, with its inexpressible dignity, tinged with subdued passion and pathos. For the woman's whole expression shone with an anxious desire to help the man who was the father of her children.

"They love each other," decided Clodagh as she watched the pair converse for a moment in the clipped dialect. A little shiver ran across her as though the ghost of the past had risen up to confront her. "Siris," she thought bitterly, "is not civilized enough to take its marriage vows lightly."

In respectful silence, Teresina led Clodagh upstairs to a wide room with an arched ceiling, a long table running down it, laid for lunch, and in each of the windows a smaller one. She drew out a chair at the first of these, smiled timidly at the guest, and motioned her to be seated. Then, as quietly as she had come, she vanished, but not without a fleeting glance, from the doorway, that drank in the blue costume.

Clodagh leaned back in her chair, glad to rest. The window looked out on the blank wall of the house beneath, but over the flat roof with its parapet she could catch a glimpse of silvery olive-trees.

The room slowly began to fill with men from their business or the market, preserving their black felt hats and apparently curious and surprised to see a lady in the place unaccompanied by a cavalier. They discussed her in the dialect but showed no outward disrespect.

The lunch exceeded her expectations. Luigi, appearing at intervals, his watchful eye on the pair of waiters, would pause for a word at her table or a jest with one of the other men. He was evidently popular. Clodagh lingered over her coffee, a project forming in her mind. At length when only two guests remained, she beckoned to her host.

"Do you ever let rooms?" she asked.

"No, Signora, it would not pay. Zere is no tourist

season 'ere." He looked at her curiously. "Ze Signora s stayin' at a Villa—wiz ze Signor Edgi, per'aps?"

She shook her head.

"I'm looking for rooms. I only arrived last night. Don't you think you could take me in? I'm sure I should be happy here." She added diplomatically, 'And I can appreciate an artist. Those quails were simply perfect."

"Ze Signora is gooda." He thought for a moment and sighed profoundly. "No, *imposibile*. I was zinking of my mozzer's room. But dark! An' also not suit at all. It open out of zis one and at nights of *festa*, zere would be noise." He pointed to a piano, with a gramophone, in the corner. "Zey sing an' play. Ze Signora could not sleep-a."

"But that would be only occasionally," Clodagh esponded. "Do let me see it?"

Luigi, deprecatingly, led her across to a door beyond, opened it and she found herself in a little antechamber with a pair of French windows and the balcony that he had observed before. She unlatched the window, stepped out and drew a deep breath of delight. For the view down the steep hill was unbroken and, far away, he could see the sapphire of the sea, over the ruins of he wall that engirdled Siris Fontana. It was like being perched in a cage above the roofs and olive groves.

She turned at last and smiled at him.

"It's wonderful! But this isn't a bedroom?"

"Ah, no, Signora. But zis would go wiz it. Ze nly way in, and it gives ze light. *Ecco!*" He unlocked door facing the window and she saw a square room with the same arched ceiling and a tiny window under he roof.

It was certainly gloomy, but clean and furnished far etter than the one at the *albergo*. Over the big bed ung a huge wooden crucifix, very ancient, one of the

arms of the ivory Christ missing. Clodagh's eyes returned to it.

"Zat was always 'ere," said Luigi. "Ze frame is built into ze wall. My ole mozzer, she like it, but per'aps ze Signora"—he shrugged his shoulders—"could cover it wiz 'er fine dresses. Zis 'ouse was once a bit of a convent. Zey leave ze cross so. No wonder! It is brokken." He snapped his fingers contemptuously.

Clodagh, inwardly surprised at his cheerful irreverence, proclaimed that she, too, liked it.

"But ze room is notta goodi-nuffi." Luigi was melancholy. "My wife, she would not sleep 'ere after my mozzer die. She say dangerous for ze babies wiz ze open balcony. An' dark. But cool for ze siesta." He showed Clodagh a deep cupboard with a row of pegs in it. "Notta goodi-nuffi." He shook his head regretfully.

"I think it is," said Clodagh. "Besides, I need only sleep here, if you could put a chair and table into the one beyond. I see there is a fire-place there. It would be cosy in the evenings."

He turned his face to her, radiant.

"Signora, if you decide to take it, all shall be done. Right-a zere! I 'ave a carpet and a sofa—we make it a *piccolo salotto*. I understan'. I 'ave travel."

"Then what would you charge, for the two rooms?"

Luigi thought for a moment.

"Seven lire a day?" he suggested.

Clodagh willingly agreed.

"Ze wine is included," said Luigi.

"Wine?" She stared at him.

"Wiz ze *pensione*, red or white." He was watching her anxiously. "Everyzing, excepta candelles."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Clodagh laughed aloud. "I thought you meant the rooms alone. Why, you wouldn't make any profit. No, let us say twelve lire a day and may I come in on Saturday?"

Luigi, overjoyed, agreed.

"I go tella my wife," he stammered.

As Clodagh followed him at leisure, she could hear, on he stairs, excited voices rising from the kitchen below. Then Teresina appeared on the threshold, a sleeping nfant in her arms. She covered the little one's face vith its shawl nervously as the guest approached.

Luigi expostulated with her.

"No, no!" She shrank back.

"The Signora mus' pardon 'er," said the man. "She s—'ow you call it? She 'ave no sense. In ze island it ring ill fortune to looka ze babies. Zey are idiot, wiz ere 'evil eye'." But he crossed his fingers as he spoke.

Clodagh smiled at the pair.

"I quite understand. Saturday then? In time for unch."

She wished them good-bye and made her way slowly ack to the *largo*, carrying with her the homely picture f the *chef* in his white cap, his timid wife and the sleeping *ambino*, strapped with multitudinous wrapping to its ard bolster, like a mummy.

The atmosphere breathed trust and love. There was dull pain in her heart and she tramped along wearily hrough the deserted streets, for it was the hour of esta. In the burning noontide heat, the square, emptied f its stalls and covered with litter, round which flies uzzed and the dust rose up in little clouds, added to er sense of depression. Her old loneliness had returned ith the consciousness of her double failure as a wife and mother.

When she reached the church steps, she paused. The eggars had vanished; in the shade, an old dog was retched out, sleeping. She passed him, lifted the ather curtain and found herself in the dim interior, ool and restful after the glare.

A wave of music came to meet her, the deep notes the organ, hidden away behind the high altar.

"Some service," she thought. But the church was empty, save for a bent old woman who was sweeping a side aisle.

Clodagh sank on to a chair half-hidden by a pillar and gave herself up to the unexpected concert, subconsciously aware that it supplied a spiritual need. For the music was like some cool stream that washed the bitterness out of her soul; all the baseness of life and its endless problem. She accepted it without wonder. It was a part of the spell of Siris. But gradually, as her reason stirred from the lethargy of her weariness, she became aware of an incongruity. Here was no sacred score but a Brahms sonata, played with a power of execution and sympathy rare in a parish organist.

It ended and the unseen musician swept into a fragment of Liszt.

Intrigued, she rose, made her way to the old peasant with the broom, and questioned her, mustering her slender store of Italian.

She could not understand the reply, but she gathered a word here and there: "*il poverello*" and a phrase which she translated roughly as meaning, "one who will not forget the War!"

Clodagh, puzzling over this, went back to her old corner. Whoever the performer might be he was certainly a fine musician. She tried to place the succeeding "suite," through which a recurring *motif* ran, but failed. It was new to her.

"I believe he's improvising," she decided at last. "It's magnificent."

All her old passion for music was roused; she sat there, her cheeks flushed, her hands clasped tightly on her lap, lost in a world of fancy.

The notes of the organ ceased and in the stillness of the church she caught the last wheeze of the bellows, then the sound of a form being moved back. But no one appeared in the silvery shadows beyond the pillars of serpentine that rose to the high dome.

Presently a priest came out of the vestry, followed by an acolyte, and busied himself in a side chapel; the old woman, hiding her broom, took up her place on a chair by the tray containing candles, and placed fresh ones on their spikes.

Clodagh, remembering the long walk home, stood up regretfully, and resumed her purchases. She dropped a coin in the poor-box with the scruple of a Protestant who has shared in a Catholic function, aware that she has no claim to it, and went out into the sunshine.

She did not guess that the moment marked a definite crisis in her life, but already, unconsciously, hope had returned, in a different guise. Men came and went, passion passed, but something beyond love remained: a standard of beauty that could be reached by work where a far-seeing Creator had added to the breath of life the divine understanding that is talent.

Work? There was salvation in work.

CHAPTER XVIII

A STRANGE adventure brought the knowledge home to her, a week later.

It had been a day of sirocco, with the peculiar nervous strain that the hot wind generates. A day of *festa* too. Now it was night, but in the adjoining room, packed tightly with holiday-makers, the shrill squeak of the gramophone, the laughter, the smoke of strong *toscani* that forced its way through the cracks made the sultry heat unbearable. Clodagh was trying to write home, but she gave it up in despair. Throwing on a dark cloak, she emerged, locked the door behind her, and went swiftly through the crowd, conscious of bold and inquisitive glances, downstairs, and into the *vico*.

She turned her steps to the heights, passed the dark Lake of the Rosary and found a track new to her. It twisted among the stunted bushes and masses of rocks piled on one another, testifying to the earthquake of many centuries ago when the cone of the hill, undermined by a grotto from which sprang the famous fountain, had caved in, damming the spring and forming the deep cup of water. It was a lonely spot, and when a rocket soared up from the town below—the inevitable adjunct to a *festa*, even in broad daylight—Clodagh jumped, then smiled at her fears.

Already her head felt lighter, though the air was charged with thunder, as she rounded the hill and came out into a scene unknown to her and devoid of life.

The great fissures in the ground were hidden now by

vegetation; a stone pine had rooted itself in a patch of level ground beyond what looked like an ancient ruin where a single pillar remained erect. This was the "House of Pythagoras" of which Horace Edge had spoken with open scepticism. Under the light of the young moon it was picturesque and convincing, and Clodagh thought of the Grecian mystic who, nine centuries before Christ, had proclaimed that the earth moved round the sun, to be met with scorn and derision.

As she descended the incline, choosing a path to the right, she could see below her the broken line of the vast wall and a solitary tower built in the rough-hewn, mortarless stones that proclaimed its antiquity. It now formed part of a straggling building, erected partly in the gap, and with a modern concrete wing that jutted out from the ramparts. At last she reached a plaster wall surrounding the garden, and paused for breath where three stones in the form of an arch enclosed a door of painted wood, scorched by the sun and peeling. On the topmost block, roughly chiselled, was the name of the little property: Torre del Moro.

"The Tower of the Moor," Clodagh translated, with a memory of Othello; for about the lonely dwelling was a hint of tragedy. "I wonder who lives there?"

As if in response to the query she heard, like a friendly voice, the unexpected sound of music. Some one was playing a piano, with an unmistakably masculine touch, in the room that formed the wing and which looked like a studio. Listening, she recognized the work, purely modern, of a Russian who had become the vogue in her last London season.

"I believe it's the man who was at the organ in church the other day," she thought, as the volume of sound dropped away and she missed the delicate lower notes.

Hardly aware of what she was doing, in her desire to catch them, she tried the handle of the door. It turned easily under her touch and she saw a garden filled with

shadows—for the moon had been covered by a cloud—with a paved path that led to the house under a vine-knotted pergola. She yielded to a swift temptation and stole a few steps down it; then on again, holding her breath, her eyes on the splash of light that poured from the window on her right.

"I *must* see him!" She conquered her scruples, her sense of adventure stirred.

The music ceased, then recommenced; but this time she could not place it.

In safety, she reached the wall and, protected by this helpful screen, edged her way past a row of pots, with tomatoes trained upwards on string, until she stood, pressed against the wooden shutters that were hooked back to admit the air.

She peered round them and caught her breath.

A man, his shoulders turned to the window, was seated at a grand piano, his profile clear against the light of a lamp on the farthest side. Still young, his dark hair was streaked with silver on the temples, the face thin, slightly ascetic but nevertheless virile and handsome. But what had astonished Clodagh was his unmistakably British cut and something haunting in his appearance. She had seen him before. She was sure of it.

In front of him were some loose sheets of written music, and his head was bent forward as he frowned in his efforts to read the untidy page.

"A composer?" On the heels of the thought came a name: "Nigel Weir!"

In a flash she saw again the far-off scene at the Molesworths' dance; Lady Somerby, in her gold dress, and over her shoulder, the dark, dissatisfied face of her partner, his brown eyes searching Clodagh's, a wistful question in their depths.

What an amazing coincidence! She remembered suddenly Margot's speech about him at Keyn Magna:

Vanished! No one knows where. Somewhere abroad." It supplied the missing link. Nigel Weir was a fellow-ile, finding his inspiration on Siris.

So absorbed was Clodagh that she jumped when a dden violent gust of wind swept across the still garden, nding the fruit trees nearly double, and the pergola oaned in response. It swirled through the open indows and carried away the loose sheets of music. A vigorous "Damn!" came out to her; the player ung round on his stool and Clodagh shrank back with stifled cry.

Never before in her life had she seen such a frightful sfigurement. For the right side of the man's face was amed and puckered by some explosion, the eyelid awn down and the mouth contorted. In a flash she ıessed the truth, recalling the old peasant's mutter: One who will not forget the War!"

As he moved to gather the scattered pages, she recoiled, ith a feeling of nausea. Her heel caught the edge of a ower-pot, she tried to save herself, slipped and went own together with the plant behind her. There followed resounding crash.

For a moment she lay there, stunned. Then it was too te to fly, for the owner was upon her. In the gathering ırkness he seized her shoulder, raised her and shook r determinedly as he scolded in fluent Italian:

"I've caught you this time, you little thief! After y tomatoes again——"

The remainder of his speech was drowned by a violent al of thunder. The long-threatened storm broke d the hail came lashing down, stinging her cheeks as e struggled.

"Oh, let me go!" she panted, frightened.

A sharp exclamation broke from him. He stepped ck, horrified. Clodagh, unhurt save for an elbow ised by contact with the wall, straightened herself, n ducked her head to avoid the sharp hailstones.

Weir saw this.

"You can't stay here! Please come inside." H led the way hastily and she followed, trying to recove her wits. He closed the windows and stood there, hi face averted. "I'm frightfully sorry. I thought yo were——"

She broke in.

"Of course! It was all my fault. But I didn't expec to hear anyone playing like that in Siris. I'd no right— It's hard to explain, except that I'm so fond of musi And—and—I'll go now." The position was insup portable.

"Please don't," said Weir over his shoulder. "Yo really mustn't, in this storm. I quite understand Do sit down. It's a lucky thing," he went on, anxiou to set her at ease, "that it isn't a few months late Hail is the scourge of this country. It would have ruine the young vines and have meant pretty nearly starva tion throughout the island for twelve months."

"No?" She was recovering.

"Yes, for the olive-growers too."

A sudden dazzling flash of lightning lit up the windo but still he remained there.

Clodagh, her heart hot with pity, guessed the reaso Impulsively, she said to him:

"I'll only wait if you'll go on playing. Please? feel I don't deserve it, but it really is such a pleasur and I've interrupted you."

"If you like." He moved cautiously sideways an hidden by the sheets of music, took his old place at th piano. "I haven't explained yet," he said in a voi with a note of relief in it, "why I behaved so roughly. do hope I didn't hurt you?"

Clodagh laughed.

"Not a bit! I was only frightened—and horrib guilty!"

"I'm thankful. They *will* sneak my tomatoes ar

've lost the key of the gate." His hands softly touched he notes. "I think," he resumed, "I've heard of ou, from my friend, Horace Edge. Aren't you Lady trangway?"

"Yes." She was inwardly surprised. Save for his ne allusion in Naples to another Englishman in the sland, the former had said no more of the well-known omposer in their midst.

She was still more astonished when Weir completed he introduction:

"My name is Wauchope. What shall I play?"

"Anything. Whatever I interrupted." She was uzzling over his *alias*, but made up her mind to respect , with no reference to her secret knowledge.

"Oh, that was part of an opera I'm composing," he nformed her. "I write—a little."

Clodagh smiled.

"It sounded lovely. May I hear it?" She leaned ack in the arm-chair and studied the long room, arranged, s she saw, for sound, without curtains and, beyond a riting-desk and stool, no other furniture.

Weir complied with her request, but added an apology: "It needs a full orchestra. Still——" His hands swept own the keys.

Outside, the hail continued, rattling against the panes nd, at intervals, a flash of lightning lit up the dim rners of her unexpected shelter. Over the mantel-ece was a single picture, a chalk drawing; the head nd shoulders of a frail and dignified old lady, a faint nile on the thin lips, with eyes that reminded Clodagh the Nigel Weir of the Molesworths' dance.

"His mother," she decided. What a shock it must ve been to her—such a good-looking man, ruined like at! Lady Somerby too. Had this been the cause of e broken engagement? She shrank from the thought, are that her fleeting dislike of the popular and beautiful man had intensified in that moment.

But gradually her speculations faded away and all her attention was held by the music.

"At any rate," she thought, "he has his art to fall back upon. The tragedy has quickened his talent."

Weir paused for a moment and leaned across the piano to reach a page that had slipped from the rest. Instinctively, Clodagh sprang to her feet, captured it and held it out.

"Here you are!"

His face averted, he took it.

"Thank you. This is a solo for the Contralto. Do you sing?"

"No. I used to. But——"

Forgetful, he had turned his head, and she shrank back. She saw the blood rush up in a dark flush under his sunburnt skin. In her shame and confusion, she lost her wits.

"I've no voice, but I'll try if you like."

The moment her words were out she repented her mad impulse. But it was too late to draw back.

"Can you read at sight?"

Frightened, she nodded.

"You'll never make out the words," he said. "Try it on *la*." He struck a note, relieved as she took up her stand behind him.

He drifted into the opening bars. Conscious of her nervousness he sang the first lines with her, then relapsed into silence and the intricate accompaniment. She found herself unsupported. Husky and out of practice but faithful to her old training, she struggled on *a mezza voce*. Slowly the film cleared from her voice and a full, rich note emerged, filling the bare room. The old nervous horror passed and a feeling of triumph possessed her. Like a woman in a dream whom no event can surprise, she was back in the past, once more a girl, filled with the joy of work and bent on extorting praise from her master.

The last chord died away and a low laugh broke from er lips, a tribute to her own powers, as unconscious s the act of singing.

"Why, you've got a glorious voice!" Weir was nthusiastic. "You're a little out of practice—your iddle register's uncertain—but it's a true Contralto. hose deep notes——" He broke off, aware that she was ipping away, her face averted, back to her old place in ne shadows.

Round the edge of the score, he watched her uneasily. Iad he offended her?

"I don't, of course, mean," he stammered, "that here's anything wrong. You've been splendidly trained nd all you need——"

She broke in:

"It's not that. You don't understand. You can't!" Ier shoulders were shaking; her hand was pressed o her heart as if to still its violent beating. With n effort she brought out the words; "I lost my voice. iphtheria. Four years ago. Now it's come—back!" The last word was almost a sob. She had awakened om her dream, and realization was pouring in, threaten-g her normal balance.

There followed a tense minute of silence. A flash of ghtning illumined the room, outlining her rigid figure s she stood by the chair, her back turned to him, ghting with her rising tears. Then she heard Weir's oice, harsh and authoritative:

"Don't cry. *Control yourself!*"

It sounded brutal. Her pride outraged, she wheeled und.

"I'm not—going to!"

Clenching her hands, she mastered the early impulse of ysteria.

"He's a devil," she thought. "Just like his face!" Weir was playing softly again and slowly her nervous nsion relaxed. He paused and struck a resounding chord.

"Let's try a scale," he suggested calmly. "I'd like to know what your compass is. Now—you ready?" He led off.

Clodagh, on her mettle, nodded.

"I won't let him see," she said to herself. "I don't *want* his sympathy!"

The third note rang false.

"You're flat," said Weir, and her eyes flashed. "Again! . . . That's better. Ah . . . bravo!"

After the scale he ran her through a couple of simple exercises. Then, as authoritatively, checked her.

"That will do. You're getting tired. Sit down and rest." He rose to his feet. "Excuse me a moment?" He passed out and left her to her thoughts.

Clodagh drew a deep breath of relief. The reaction had set in. She felt like a creature reborn, life throbbing through her veins. She could have danced for very joy, but she sat there, hugging her knees, seeing visions of the future. Work, fame—consolation!

"And I've never even *tried* to sing. I'd given it up as hopeless," she thought. "Not even when I was at Albrey. That must have helped: the wonderful air, the rest, and life in the open. But to come all this way unenlightened, and find my voice! Like a bird escaping from a cage, in its first triumphant flight."

The analogy startled her, but further reflection was prevented by Weir's return. He carried a tray, a tumbler on it with some foamy yellow mixture. Advancing sideways like a crab, he drew the stool from the writing-table and placed his offering at her elbow.

"An egg beaten up with Marsala," he told her. "Please try and drink it, Lady Strangway. It will do you good. You've had a big shock."

As he moved away, to her surprise, she saw that his hands were shaking. From the safe refuge of the piano, he went on, his voice gentle:

"You must have thought me a brute just now, but I

daren't let you break down. I was afraid of the after-effect. You've got to think of your voice now. So I treated you like a fellow-student. You forgive me?"

"Of course," said Clodagh, repentant. "You were quite right. If you'd been sympathetic"—she paused, smiling—"I should have howled! It's so kind of you to bring me this." She lifted the foaming glass to her lips and drank. "It's delicious! I want to explain——"

"Not yet. There's plenty of time," Weir put in nervously.

"But I ought to be getting home," she said.

A little shiver ran across her, for the night was turning cold. It did not escape his keen eyes. He drew some matches from his pocket, crossed to the hearth and kneeling down, struck one and applied it to the fir cones piled beneath the logs. They flared up cheerfully. With the help of the bellows he soon had a fire burning in the grate. He went back and extinguished the lamp.

"You don't mind?" he asked lightly. "I hate a glare, don't you? And now we can talk."

"Yes, that's much nicer." Pitifully, she watched him settle himself, cross-legged, on the rug, in such a fashion that his wounds were hidden from her.

"May I hear the story?" he asked at last, when she had finished the egg and Marsala.

He listened in sympathetic silence.

"It's like a dream!" Clodagh ended. "You don't think I'm asleep, do you? The doctor seemed certain that my vocal chords were affected."

"Even doctors can make mistakes, and you seem, to me, very wideawake." Weir smiled as he spoke.

"Thank Heaven!" said Clodagh.

"All the same," he warned her gravely, "you mustn't overdo it now. You ought to be under a good master who won't allow you to strain your voice."

"I know. I've been thinking it out," she told him.

"I suppose it means going to Rome or some other big town. But I don't want to leave Siris."

"There might be another way," said Weir. "Have you ever heard of Ezio Tiepi? He was well known in his day as a singer. Later, he settled in Milan and started an operatic school there. On his wife's death, he retired, came to Siris for his health—he was broken up, poor old chap—and now he's living here. At the Villa Garibaldi. He's rather a friend of mine, and if I put it all before him there's a chance that he might offer to superintend your studies. You couldn't be in safer hands. Shall I mention it to him?"

"If you would? It sounds delightful." A fresh difficulty assailed her. "Can I hire a piano here?"

"I'm afraid not." He thought for a moment. "Of course, you don't want the expense—and delay—of getting one over from Salerno?"

"No. I must use Luigi's, if he'll let me, between the restaurant hours." Mischief dawned in her eyes. "Or supply music during dinner to the gentlemen in the black felt hats! Do they never leave them off?"

"I doubt it! Possibly in bed." Weir was amused. "But you can't rely on Luigi's piano. Have you ever tried it?"

"I've *heard* it!" She shuddered.

He made up his mind.

"Better come here." He saw her start. "Well, it's quite simple. I go down to bathe at ten o'clock and I never return until lunch. Sometimes I go fishing. I've a little sailing-boat. So you would have the place to yourself."

"It's too kind of you," said Clodagh. "But are you sure you won't regret it? I really don't like to say yes."

"Then I'll say it for you," he laughed. "You don't know what a pleasure it is to do anything for a fellow-countrywoman. I haven't spoken to one for years."

"Then I'll accept gratefully so long as you'll turn me out any moment when I'm in the way." She added gaily, "And I'll respect your tomatoes!" She glanced at her watch and rose to her feet. "I must go. I shall be shut out."

"Wait a minute. I'll come with you. The storm's over. I'd like a walk."

He fetched his coat, turned up the collar and drew down the brim of the wide felt hat over his ruined face. It was an effectual disguise.

Seeing his action, Clodagh was glad that she had not refused his escort. As they passed out through the garden, she questioned him about the Villa.

"*Did* a Moor live there?" she asked.

"It's possible. They were masters of Siris for a time and they probably strengthened the defences, adding watch-towers at intervals. The house is too big for me, but the studio was a temptation. It used to belong to an artist. Half of the rooms I never go into. Giacomina, my old housekeeper, uses some as a drying-ground in bad weather. Her daughter is my laundress and her grandson helps me in the garden. I've adopted the family." He chuckled. "It was simpler in the end! So, if you see them about, you'll understand the household. By the way, there's a girl who has fits. But she's not allowed in the music-room."

"Fits? How dreadful! What do you do?" Clodagh saw Weir smile.

"Nothing. Beppo—the gardener—puts a spoon between her teeth, lays her flat and sits on her. I found him like this the other day, quite cheerful, polishing my boots! He told me philosophically that the devil again was in possession, with the assurance that it would pass."

"Sounds like Coué," said Clodagh, with a memory of Aunt Helen. "*Ça passe, ça passe!*"

But Weir had not heard of him. As they circled the

dark lake, he pointed to it where it lay, like a pool of ink, in its crater.

"That's where the devil lives, when he's not tormenting our Rosina. He's amphibious in Siris. At times, mysterious bubbles come up and the peasants cross themselves. The lake's supposed to be bottomless, like the pit of destruction. Since nobody dares to sound it, the legend is unimpaired."

"Haven't you ever tried?" asked Clodagh.

"Well, I have," Weir confessed. "With a fishing-line and a weight on a dark night, but my tackle gave out. It's amazingly deep and, what is stranger, the water keeps the same level irrespective of the seasons. Edge, who's always credulous, is inclined to believe in the theory of diabolic intervention. He's writing now a book on legends and religion combined. Of course he's a mystic, and saturated in Greek lore."

"But he doesn't believe that Pythagoras stayed here," Clodagh remarked.

Weir smiled mischievously.

"No, it would clash with an earlier work. His *History of Màgna Græcià*. He's an amazing mass of erudition and wild fancy. For instance, he insists that he remembers his other lives, that he's lived here before, been a Moor and a Greek. He climbs into my tower sometimes and tries to visualize the past as one of the conquerors of the island! The dear old chap nearly killed himself with a decoction of honey, grape juice and strange herbs which he declared was the drink of the gods. Has he talked to you of the 'spell of Siris'?"

"He has. But I rather believe in it after my experience to-night. There simply must be magic about. You can't guess what it means to me to be able to sing again."

"I can." Beneath the brim of his hat, he glanced sideways at his companion. The moon shone clear in the heavens and illumined Clodagh's face, freshened by

air and exercise. From her fur collar, it emerged, vivid and eager as a child's, and he could see the changing expressions flit over it, and follow her thoughts. "I can guess too what you must have gone through losing a voice like that."

She nodded, her lips compressed. As they sheered off down a dark *vico*, she turned to him impulsively. "I shouldn't have known, except for you! I only wish there was something I could do in return?" she pleaded.

"Thanks, but there's nothing," said Weir.

CHAPTER XIX

CHRISTMAS had come and gone, the New Year swift on its heels. Already, in the South, anemones reared their fragile heads in sheltered corners among the olives and the sap was rising in the trees. In a few weeks the almonds would flower, casting a delicate rosy veil over the fertile slopes. Though England lay deep in snow, Siris was beckoning to the Spring.

Clodagh, emerging from the doorway of the *maestro's* little house, could feel the thrust of young life in the air as the warmth beat back from the ground where every green thing was sprouting. Birds had begun their mating songs, and even the old singing-master had donned an elaborate waistcoat. His slightly theatrical appearance and the care with which a long lock of hair was curled with tongs and combed thinly across his bald head always amused her. It was jet black, like his moustache, a suspicious colour compared with his eyebrows and scanty lashes of silver grey, in a network of fine wrinkles.

The touch of vanity seemed to Clodagh pathetic and excusable, for Tiepi had been a handsome man in the days when his advent at La Scala would fill every seat in the huge house. She was proud to be his last pupil. The lessons in his little room that was almost filled by the piano, where from every wall signed photographs of famous singers smiled down on the pair, had become the centre of her thoughts. Once more she lived for her voice.

She was studying Italian too. Edge had found her a

teacher in the shape of the priest's niece, who had earned a convent education in her young days on the mainland and despised the local dialect. He had also persuaded Clodagh to respect the habit of siesta scorned, to the detriment of their health, by most of her countrywomen. In the cool, dark room, she would fall asleep beneath the broken crucifix, whilst the heat poured down on the shuttered town, and awake refreshed, eager for work. She had never felt so well in her life, though at moments the dark cloud descended and she was once more a married woman, facing a troubled future and amazed at the sense of regained youth.

To-day, she might have been nineteen, as she lingered, her face warm and eager, on the doorstep of the *maestro's* house, smiling at the old man and his warnings against any strain of her vocal chords, or extension of the hours for practice.

" ' Who goes softly, goes securely, and who goes securely goes far.' " He quoted the Italian proverb and followed it up with another : " ' One does not beat the horse that trots.' So a little good work and then a rest. *Così* you make me pleasure, Contessa." He gave her an eloquent parting glance from his tired black eyes in which still lurked a spark of ancient coquetry.

" I'll remember," promised Clodagh, always amused by the title which Tiepi insisted on giving her. " I'm lunching with Mr. Edge to-day. Have you any message for him ? "

" My compliments to the Signore. *Ma* "—he raised a fat finger and wagged it solemnly in her face—" be careful of the throat, Contessa. No ices, unless they're boiled ! "

This was a well-worn joke and she went off laughing and waving her hand. Ezio Tiepi watched her progress, her light, free step and the proud poise of her little, dark head, until she turned the distant corner.

La gioventù ! He checked a sigh as he made his way

back to the stuffy room that held a past generation of singers.

Clodagh reached the main *largo*. From the doorsteps of the shops, where the owners were transacting business or gossiping, came frequent greetings, for the island had adopted her. In Italy a smile goes far and a handshake can make a friend for life. Clodagh rarely grudged either.

The barber, whose side-line was surgery, looked up and bowed profoundly in the act of strapping a peasant's leg, laid open by a fall on his sickle. The victim was cursing volubly and round the doorway was a circle of interested spectators. Clodagh paused, sympathetic, then, struck by a happy thought, entered the adjoining shop where the government board testified to the authorized sale of tobacco and salt. She returned with a handful of *toscani* and held them out to the sufferer.

"*Si*, for you!" She smiled at the man and went on, carefully choosing her words, "In the war our soldiers liked to smoke when they were wounded. They said it helped them."

His dark and sullen face changed. From all sides came a hum of approval and Clodagh resumed her walk, staccato blessings in her ears.

How easy it was to give pleasure in this primitive place, and how grateful they were! A sudden memory came to her of visiting at Keyn Magna and the villagers' silent hostility, cloaked by an outward air of respect; the grudging thanks that secretly compared her income with their own, discounting her philanthropy.

It was partly the fault of her mother-in-law, Clodagh decided. The old lady could never resist the chance of a lecture, and she spied on the villagers, invading their privacy and insisting on a superior status instead of a common humanity. The climate, as well, might affect their attitude, the long cold winters and lack of sunshine; those winters to which she would have to return. For the first time for several days her mind reverted to the

problem that had ended in the adventure of Siris, as, leaving the town behind her, she wandered down the narrow lanes dividing the different properties. They were barely wide enough for the mules to pass through with their heavy loads of firewood and of fodder. On either hand lay terraces filled with vines and olive groves and she turned aside for a short rest on a shady bank out of the glare.

It was peaceful sitting here, her back against a gnarled ilex, with, in the distance, the blue sea and the white Villa where Edge lived. How far away Keyn Magna seemed! She drew some letters from the pocket of her loose white coat, made by the local tailor from the cloth which her old friend had given her as a Christmas present. She was wearing it in his honour to-day over a summer frock. The rough but spotless texture seemed typical of her present life. Her "monastic habit!" Without the discomforts of the conventual routine. For Luigi's cooking did not point to asceticism, and hardly for a nun would Tiepi have donned his brocaded waistcoat! She smiled at the thought, then, frowning, returned to the correspondence that had reached her the night before.

It was evident to her that things were not going too smoothly in the family life at the Manor. The opening of the alms-houses had met with a lack of enthusiasm that had obviously nettled Ian. She re-read his description and paused when she reached these lines:

"Margot did her best, but of course she couldn't fill your place. She doesn't understand the village and it was difficult with the mater. The weather was bad too, and people didn't turn up. Altogether it rather fizzled out—no one seemed to know what to do. Well, it's over, and I'm busy now on the new scheme, the farm for Ex-Service men. It entails a lot of writing. Tibby comes up in the mornings and gives me a hand with the letters. She means well, but she's such a fool!"

Tibby, not Margot, helping Ian? The latter's love did not run to service! Clodagh smiled scornfully and turned to Aunt Helen's rambling epistle. As usual, it was full of her daughter:

"The snow has been very trying lately and the poor child can't get out. Still, she bravely makes the best of things; plays billiards with Ian in the evenings. So interesting. I love to watch them."

Clodagh's lips curled as she read. Aunt Helen, blind to the situation, peacefully chaperoning the pair.

"Of course it's a little dull for Margot, as we don't see much of the neighbours, though Ian meets them out hunting. But next week she's going to town for a few days, to stay with our old friends, the Wisdens. Between ourselves, I believe that Major Wensleydale is in London. But I *say nothing*! Far wiser. Ian doesn't look well and I'm sure he misses you. I think it may be his liver, as at times he's a little irritable. Even Margot has noticed it, and you know what good friends they are. Your mother-in-law never comes here. A relief to me as we've nothing in common. Did I tell you that the lodge-keeper's wife at the east gate, whom I've been helping, had twins last Tuesday? Both boys—a *triumph* for Coué! Now mind you tell me how you are when next you write. Poor Addy has had a sharp attack of bronchitis and she doesn't seem to pick up her strength. If *only* she would be led by me!"

Clodagh replaced the two letters in the pocket of her coat. They were nearly a fortnight old, having missed the single weekly boat. She wondered if Margot had returned and if Ian's recovery had synchronized with this event?

She sat there, frowning, her eyes veiled to the glowing

beauty of the scene. She was puzzled by the change in herself. Two months ago she would have welcomed these typical confidences and all that she read between the lines. Ian was finding Margot useless and wrapped up in herself. He was missing his wife's unfailing support, her tact in local enterprises. And Margot was bored with the quiet country, her fancy veering to Wensleydale. Well, wasn't this what Clodagh had prayed for, the experiment justified?

Yes—the beginning of the end! It set a limit to her flight.

At the thought a sudden revolt seized her, unexpected and overwhelming. To leave Siris, return to Keyn Magna—take up her old life again? Become once more Ian's shadow, and the woman he looked to for an heir?

"I can't. I *won't*!" She clenched her hands as the words broke from her lips, startling her in the drowsy silence.

A man passed, leading a mule with a couple of barrels that weighed it down as it picked its path daintily over the stony, uneven ground, its legs stiff, head drooping. He gave her a furtive, sidelong glance and a faint smile as though the picture of the pretty woman sitting there stirred the torpor of his senses, lulled by the sunshine and exercise.

Something in the well-built peasant reminded Clodagh of her husband. Another fine animal, superb in his strength, non-intellectual, to whom the fruits of his toil, wine to drink and woman to serve him, were his inalienable rights; woman, the lesser animal, to receive a minimum of respect when she fulfilled her purpose in life and brought forth lusty children.

To go back, to all that? To Ian whose passion for Margot had staled. Her flesh recoiled from the thought.

"It isn't right. It isn't clean!" She struck the hard ground with her hand. "Just because he supports me. That's prostitution, not love. I shouldn't have any self-

respect. Yet what can I do? I've married him. I'm as much his slave as if he'd bought me." Her anger swept her away. "If I had been the one in fault, he could have turned me out of doors, got rid of me legally. But because he's a man, he goes scot-free. That's the English law, our 'civilization'! We're as much the property of our husbands as women in the Cave Age. And we talk about Emancipation! It will never come until every woman supports herself and is free of men. It's money—we're bought—the price of our bodies. And we call it 'the duty of a wife'!"

Her violence spent itself and was succeeded by weariness and infinite perplexity. She sat there, chin cupped in her hand, trying, in vain, to think clearly. What had happened to upset the scheme framed on that night of infinite pain?

"I *wanted* to win him back, to be able to return. It seemed a last chance of happiness. I prayed for it, dreamed of it, in those hopeless days at Naples. And, now that I'm winning, I *don't* want it! Can love come and go like that? If so, work's a better thing." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Yet I *did* love him. I'm fond of him now. But it's all spoilt. He isn't strong. He's weak, at the mercy of his senses. A tyrant too, like his mother. If I went back we should only fight; fight until one of us was broken. I can live without him. *That's* what I've learnt!"

But the thought brought no satisfaction and, at last, conscious of the hour, she rose and continued her way downhill.

Horace Edge was in the garden when she reached the Villa. He welcomed her with a laughing allusion to her coat:

"Another hermit! The fashion spreads. How nice of you to wear it to-day. You're satisfied with my little tailor?"

"Quite." She was nervous and tried to disguise it.

She dreaded the perspicacity of the dark eyes turned on her. "He's a true son of Siris!"

"And what does that constitute?" asked Edge as he led the way to the terrace where lunch was spread under an awning on a table bright with fruit and flowers.

"It's rather too hazy to explain. Sunshine, contentment——" She shrugged her shoulders. "How can one define charm?"

"One can't. One simply looks at you!" He drew out a chair for her and bowed. "Be seated, Contessa!"

Clodagh laughed.

"You've been talking to Signor Tiepi. It's catching! I was to give the *Signor inglese* his sincere compliments." Her eyes slipped past her host to the water, so still in the little harbour that the shadows of the three saints guarding it were reflected as though they had slid from their columns to dive into the blue-green shallows; one at the end of each pier and a third by the downward flight of steps in marble that was turning to jade. "What are the names of your saints?" she asked.

"No one knows! So I've called them 'Faith, Hope and Charity.' Hope and Faith set me forth on my journeys, but Charity stands nearer home to welcome me on my return, without question or rebuke. She is the saint who stoops to a sinner when the others have turned to stone." He saw his guest's expression harden. "You don't agree?"

"Not altogether. Why *should* she stoop? There's little charity extended to the one who pardons. It's her duty'! That is, if it's a woman. If a man, it's known as 'mercy.' A word with a fine ring in it. Just try and say 'duty'? It's a mean little sound, like 'prunes' and prisms.' But 'mercy' is male; it rolls round your tongue!"

"Yet 'duty' rhymes with 'beauty.'" Edge was experimenting.

"To the ear. Not in speaking. The lips save it."

She laughed to cover her relief. She had led him away from her first slip which had betrayed her cynical mood.

"I grant that—it's more melodious—but not the rest of your argument." He led her back deliberately to the speech she had hoped was forgotten. "The pardon that harbours a grudge is only a form of compromise. Forgiveness must come from the heart. It arises from love, not reason. Duty," he added mischievously, "I refuse to discuss. It's earned a bad name in this generation, probably through over-emphasis in the last. It's deserved a rest; it will rise again." He changed the subject as the servant appeared with a fresh course. "How is your singing going?"

Her face brightened.

"Splendidly. It ought to, with such a fine master. He's strict, you know, but I like that."

"You don't object to discipline, then?" Her host's dark eyes had a twinkle in them. "It's sometimes called the 'twin of duty.' Do you still practise at Wauchope's Villa?"

"Yes, every day, when I haven't a lesson."

"Do you ever see him?"

She looked up, wondering what lay behind the question.

"No, why? I wish I did. He never gives me a chance, and I do so want to thank him. Sometimes I hear his voice in the garden, but he avoids the music-room."

"A pity." Edge sighed. "Of course, in a way I can understand it, but he's much too sensitive. It would do him good to talk to you."

"I can't force myself upon him," Clodagh objected. "I've done my best, even stayed beyond my time. And once"—she smiled—"I left my sunshade! It was no good. Beppo went to look for it and I retired in haste, blushing. It seemed such a schoolgirl's trick!"

Edge laughed.

"Can you blush?"

"Yes, *still*." To her annoyance, under his teasing glance, she felt her cheeks growing warm.

"It's the sign of a lively conscience," he told her, "added to a fine skin. You should be grateful to the gods for virtue and a good complexion. They do not always go together!" His eyes were fixed on his glass. He held it up to the light, admiring the colour of the wine.

"Purposely," thought Clodagh, aware of his unfailing tact.

A sudden impulse came to her to unburden a part of her trouble to this scrupulous and delicate friend. She caught at the opening he had offered.

"I would gladly exchange my skin for a thick one if it meant getting rid of my 'lively conscience'!"

He raised his brows.

"What heresy is this? One moment?" He heard a step on the terrace behind him and waited for the servant to leave them. "Now!" He studied her shadowed face and added simply, "Tell me what's wrong?"

She answered his question with another:

"How can one know oneself?"

"The old trouble!" He smiled at her. "Old as the centuries. The eternal mistrust of civilization. Even the Greeks failed to solve it. Over the temple of Apollo at Delphi was inscribed: 'Know thyself.' But Pythagoras substituted: 'Respect thyself. Let this be thy first care.' It's simpler to comprehend, though few can live up to the ideal unfalteringly in daily life."

"But it isn't only ourselves," said Clodagh. "It's the people around us who make it hard." She gave an impatient sigh. "And one changes imperceptibly. I've changed. Since I came to Siris."

"In what way?" His face was anxious.

She caught his thought and smiled slightly.

"Oh, it isn't the 'spell' you talked about. Not Siris itself—lotus-land! It's partly, perhaps, the miracle of

regaining my voice. A new object in life. Something to work for and attain. Here I can be myself—I can't quite explain to you. But it's a good life, clean and free. It may be selfish? I don't know." She paused, her dark brows meeting in an effort of concentration, her eyes fixed on the dazzling water that stole up to the steps below her, and went on in a lower voice, "When I came here I was miserable. I'd had a great shock and disillusion. All my world had gone to pieces and I wanted to creep away and hide. That's why your island tempted me; an 'island of peace and forgetfulness.' But it wasn't only a panicky flight. It was part of a settled plan. I made my health the excuse and no one knew that I had guessed the trouble that was going on." Her words gathered impetus and she proceeded breathlessly: "It was really an experiment. A dangerous one—I knew that. But I hoped everything from my absence; that the trouble would pass, wear itself out. I never imagined *I* should change!"

"And now," Edge suggested, "you begin to doubt the wisdom of the plan?"

"Oh, no! I think it's succeeding. Quicker, too, than I expected. It isn't that. It's even worse!" She bit her lip. Under her breath, he heard her say, "I don't *want* to go back."

"You poor child!" It came from his heart. He could easily see through the flimsy disguise of the story poured out so ingenuously. He guessed that the cause of her disillusion was the husband to whom she never alluded. "In whose hands does it rest? Your return, I mean."

"In mine," said Clodagh.

Hardly aware of her action, she rose from the table and moved across to the parapet restlessly, her back turned to her host. He could see the tension of her shoulders as her hands grasped the warm marble. But he did not attempt to follow her. After a fugitive spell of silence, his voice came to her where she stood:

"Leave it to a higher guidance. Wait! You will receive a sign."

"You believe that?" She twisted sideways, incredulous, faintly scornful.

"I do." Edge nodded gravely. "In every crisis in our lives, if we seek wisdom it is given. You can call it 'sub-conscious instinct' if you prefer an obscure term. I prefer that of spiritual aid, God's endless revelation. But it's not a cure for suffering. That is the payment for past mistakes. I don't mean only in this life." His voice softened. "You're paying, my child. We all pay. But there's no such thing as divine injustice. We are what we have made ourselves. By suffering our debts are cancelled. Whoever has injured you will pay. It's the law. I've been paying for thirty years."

"You?" Her hazel eyes widened. "For *thirty years*? Oh, no!" She was by his side, her hand outstretched in a swift impulse of sympathy.

The friendly clasp of the long fingers, ivory with age, brought a sense of comfort to her perplexed and lonely heart. He had suffered; he understood.

He read the thought in her eyes.

"Yes. If it's any help, I don't mind telling you. I, too, have known the loss of all that made up the sum of my happiness; home, country, wife and sons. Sit down, my dear, and finish your fruit." He pulled out her chair for her. Absently, she obeyed him. "It's an involved story, but I think I can put it briefly. When I came into my property I discovered in my grandfather's papers that I was not the lawful heir. After a prolonged struggle I decided on restitution, though it proved me to be illegitimate. That's what my wife has never forgiven. For the children's sake. A good woman, she was blinded by her maternal love. She insisted on a separation and I sought refuge in Siris. My sons took their mother's part. It's natural—I can understand it—but at the time it was bitter. Not now. I'm telling you all this because

I've outlived both pain and regret and found the peace of renunciation. You, too, will learn that peace."

"Shall I?" She looked at him wistfully. "But my trouble is small compared to yours."

"No," Edge interrupted her. "You're young, I'm old. Time blunts the senses. Still, the old can give advice. Do nothing in haste. Put your trust in whatever God you have made for yourself out of the divine spark that is lit in every human soul. Creeds are nothing; belief is all. You can even fall back on my three Saints, Faith, Hope and Charity." He smiled at her with real affection. "Especially Charity."

"But 'forgiveness must come from the heart,'" she quoted. She pushed her plate away from her; a sudden symbol of revolt. "I can't forgive! That's the truth."

"Wait!"

"That's difficult too," said Clodagh.

"Because you have the greatest gift of all," he told her.

She looked up wonderingly.

"Youth," he completed. "Golden youth." His voice changed. "Here comes our coffee, the cup I owe you! You remember?"

"But I drank that long ago." She shook off her depression. "Siris makes one very greedy. Every one's so kind. The worst of it is I can make no return."

"Nonsense!" He laughed at her. "You've brought a fresh interest into our lives. You should hear what the island thinks of you. It's good propaganda for England! Tiepi is your slave. Luigi too. As for Teresina, I'm surprised she's not jealous. But that's a woman in a thousand. They were engaged for seven years. Did you know that? All the time he was in America. She worked and saved and was faithful to him, resisting other suitors—a prolonged battle with her parents. She used to tell me of her troubles. Her one fear was that when he returned Luigi would be

disillusioned. For Time does not stay its hand for lovers."

"But she's beautiful now," said Clodagh.

"Yes, she's recovered her looks since her marriage. You know the French saying: *'Vieille fille, jeune mère'*? It has been true in her case. The older I grow," he told her, "the more I admire and respect women. They are the salt of the earth. Of course one meets with exceptions." He frowned down at his coffee-cup and continued inconsequently, "I wish you could get hold of Wauchope. He needs a woman's healing touch." He added in a lower voice, "To repair what another woman has injured."

Clodagh's eyes sought his.

"I guessed that."

Edge nodded.

"I don't believe you've been brought to Siris without some hidden purpose. I can see you two great friends. You belong to the same plane. Have you never felt this?"

"Once, long ago——" She checked herself. "Oh, I didn't mean to tell you that! I've met him before, but he doesn't know. He *mustn't* know."

"He won't, through me."

Clodagh looked at him thoughtfully. Did Edge hold the true story of Weir and Lady Somerby? She threw out a feeler cautiously:

"I know, too, who the woman is." She was watching his face. "So do you."

"Not the name." He put up a hand to prevent further confidences. "I don't wish to. It's enough that Wauchope is living here to shield her from the result of her cowardice and egotism. But he's becoming a misanthrope. If you could make him feel that his physical disabilities were no bar to a woman's friendship, it would be a fine act. I know it's not pleasant to be rebuffed, but, if you can stand it, persevere."

"I'll try." Her hazel eyes shone. Suddenly she

clenched her hand. "To think that women like that exist! A man crucified for his country."

Edge made no rejoinder. Inwardly he was satisfied with the result of his intervention. It had not been for Wauchope's sake alone. He guessed that Clodagh's experiences had embittered her against his sex. Here was a case in which a man had suffered at the hands of a woman, but continued to shield her reputation through a fine and quixotic impulse. Edge had cleverly balanced the scales.

CHAPTER XX

WITHIN a week of this conversation, Clodagh found the chance she sought of cultivating Weir's friendship.

It had been raining all day, but with the advent of the night the wind veered round and swept away the clouds that pressed upon the island. The air, sweet and salt to her lips, as she stood on the balcony, tempted Clodagh to brave the darkness.

A baby moon hung over the sea, its light too feeble to pierce the shadows, as she picked her way over the wet ground, past the lake with its fringe of bushes, mysteriously calm in its deep cup. As she mounted higher, she saw a solitary figure, collar turned up, hat bent down to cover his injured cheek, leaning against the broken pillar that capped the overgrown ruins.

Noiselessly she approached the dreamer.

"Good evening, Mr. Wauchope?"

Weir started at the sound of her voice, turned, and peered at her nervously.

"Oh! How do you do?" He shook the hand extended to him so stiffly that Clodagh repressed a smile.

"I'm so glad to see you." Her voice was assured. "I've been wanting to ask your advice. About my lessons with Signor Tiepi."

"Yes?" The word was discouraging.

A gust of wind threatened her hat and she twisted sideways, her head bent.

"I can't stay here"—she smiled at him—"or I shall be blown away! Will you walk a few yards with me whilst I explain matters?" She moved forward as she spoke, taking his consent for granted. Unwillingly, he obeyed her. "The fact is, the *maestro* never sends in an account. I'm wondering if I ought to suggest it? Was anything arranged between you when you so kindly talked it over?"

"No." He stared straight before him. "I'm afraid it didn't occur to me."

"I see." There came an ominous pause, but Clodagh persevered. "He's such a wonderful master! I can't tell you how grateful I am. Also for letting me use your piano. I feel I oughtn't to trouble you further, but I can't go on taking endless lessons without paying the dear old man. I wish you'd give me your advice." Imperceptibly she quickened her steps. In the dim light she could see the fine-cut and virile profile outlined against the night under the broad brim of his hat, the familiar black felt of the peasants. Pity possessed her as his glance swept sideways nervously, with no movement of the head, so stiffly held on his graceful shoulders.

"Since you ask me," he replied, "I should say, leave it alone at present. He's an old man and inclined to be touchy. He doesn't take pupils now and it's quite possible that he's helping you as a friend. If not," he added, "I'm sure you'll find his charges moderate."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that!" She laughed. "But I don't want to impose on his kindness." She glanced back over her shoulder, hearing brisk steps in their wake, and drew aside to the edge of the path.

Two men and a boy swung past. From the latter came a treble greeting:

"Buona notte, Signora!"

Clodagh acknowledged it, amused at the lad's swift recognition.

"That's Toni, the grocer's son. Little wretch! I

ound him, the other morning, torturing one of those reen tree-frogs. I insisted on his handing it over. Since then, he considers himself my friend!"

"I hope you didn't reward him," said Weir, "or here'll be an outbreak of cruelty whenever you take your walks abroad."

"I never thought of that," she confessed.

From Weir came an unexpected chuckle.

"I've been let in that way myself."

"Well, it shan't occur again," said Clodagh. "But I hate to see any animal suffer."

They had come to the meeting of two paths, the one hat led to the Torre del Moro and another that curved ound the crest of the hill. Deliberately she chose the atter.

"I shall take your advice about Signor Tiepi," she aid quickly to cover her action. "How is your own work going?"

"I haven't been composing lately. It only takes me by fits and starts."

"I hope I don't interrupt it? You'd let me know honestly if my practice hour did that, wouldn't you, Mr. Vauchope?"

"But it doesn't." He pulled up. "I can't recommend his path to you. It gets shocking farther on. In any ase, I——"

She interrupted his excuses in an obstinate effort to etain him:

"What ever are those men doing?" She pointed o the trio ahead, in whose steps they had followed.

The party had halted, the boy holding his wide cape s a screen to the wind, whilst the others bent over ome hidden object.

"Why, they've lighted a Chinese lantern," cried lodagh. "How quaint! Are they going to join a rocession?"

"No." Weir smiled. "They're preparing to cross

haunted ground. If you offered them a big bribe they wouldn't risk it without a candle! The hill this side has a bad name."

"Not the devil again, out of the lake?" She recalled their earlier conversation.

"We don't define it." His voice was solemn. "It's haunted—that's quite sufficient. At any rate, to peasant minds. Unluckily, this is a short cut to the valley and a bed of reeds that is a favourite haunt of birds. Those men are off to set snares."

"To catch them? Why? What sort of birds?" She was genuinely interested. Her eyes followed the bobbing lantern, like a huge orange hung from a stick, carried by the central figure as the party moved on at a brisk pace.

"Any sort, unluckily. It's a wonder a bird remains on the island! It's forbidden by law, but the peasants risk it. You can hardly blame them," he explained. "They're too poor to buy meat. They live on polenta and macaroni all the year round, a monotonous diet. Birds make a welcome change. But they're fined if—Hallo!" He broke off.

For a sudden shout reached their ears. The trio ahead took to their heels, leaping over the rough ground, the men out-distancing the boy who followed madly in their wake. They disappeared down the hill, the glow from the lantern extinguished.

"Something must have frightened them," Weir decided. "I wonder what?"

"Let's go and see?" Her voice was eager.

"It's probably nothing but sheer panic, the wind whistling through the rocks." He tried, in vain, to dissuade her. "It's not fit for you, Lady Strangway. The hill's covered with loose stones. You mustn't attempt it, in this light."

"I believe you're superstitious too!" She took a few steps forward and called back over her shoulder,

aughing, " Don't come, if you're afraid ! I can face the host alone."

With a long stride he caught her up.

" Well, I've warned you." As he spoke she stumbled. Do be careful ! You'll sprain your ankle. Here—ake my arm ? "

It was grudgingly offered, but Clodagh calmly accepted . As sensitive as Weir himself, she could feel his slight ecoil as her hand linked them together. A touch of nischief curved her lips. She thought : " I wish dear ld Edge could see us ! I've never laid siege to a man efore. I'd no idea it was such hard work ! "

On they went in a steady silence, for the path absorbed neir attention. It was nothing more than a goat-track cross the steep and barren slope, filled with rocks iled on one another, the soil too shallow for vegetation, ave where a solitary cactus, spiked and ghostly against ne sky-line, clung to a surface where sand had col-cted.

" I suppose all this is due to the earthquake," Clodagh uggested presently.

" Probably." Weir found his voice. It seemed to im incredible that he should be wandering through the ight arm-in-arm with a woman. " This side of the ill suffered the most. Even the old wall has gone nd the road that led up to the convent which used to rown the highest point. There's a portion remaining in ne valley that winds round to the sacred grotto. Where ne Rosary was discovered—I expect Edge has told you ne legend. What's that ? " He stiffened, listening.

They halted, Clodagh holding her breath. There was omething uncanny about the place, and a little shiver n down her spine as she stared past the uneven boulders the deep drop in the ground before them, filled with adows that seemed to move.

The faint sound was repeated. It came from a fissure their right as though it bubbled up from the earth.

"It must be some animal," said Weir. "That's what frightened our gallant sportsmen."

"Perhaps it's hurt?" Clodagh suggested.

"If you'll stay here, I'll go and see." He glanced sideways. "I shan't go far."

"Oh, I'm all right." She recovered her nerve.

"Shout if you want me," he said lightly.

She watched him make his way along the cleft in the rocky ground. Again there came the mysterious cry and he halted. Dropping on his knees he felt for his matches, lit one and investigated the cavity.

"It's a goat!" he called back to her.

"No!" Relieved, she followed him, forgetful of her promise. "Let me see?" She bent down by his side.

"Talk about the devil!" he laughed, a natural ring in his voice, for, in his excitement, his shyness had vanished. He struck another match. "Look!"

She caught a glimpse of the satyr-like head, of twisted horns and a shaggy coat.

"Na-a-ah!" said the goat.

"How ever did he get there?" she wondered.

"Slipped, I expect. Odd, for they're generally so sure-footed. But once in, the sides are like glass. He'd have no purchase for his hoofs."

"We must get him out, poor creature! Can you reach him?" Clodagh asked.

"I'll try." Weir went down on his chest, dug his toes into the ground and dived into the cavity. "Just! Not enough to get a grip." Rather breathless, he emerged.

"I've an idea!" Clodagh unfastened the loose belt round her coat. "If you slipped this under him and used it as a sling?"

He nodded.

"Well, could you hang on to my legs? Do you mind? It would give me a few more inches."

"All right." She squatted down and took a firm grip of his ankles. "Don't fall in!" she implored him.

After a moment's struggle his voice came up muffled, triumphant:

"I've done it!" He wriggled back, an end of the belt in each hand. "But will it hold?" He turned his full face to her, forgetful of the scarred cheek. "Will you scold me if it's spoilt?"

"Rather not." She nerved herself to look back. "If you'll pass me your matches, I'll give you a light."

Weir came to his senses.

"No, you mustn't! It's not safe. I want you to stand clear. Please, Lady Strangway?"

"Oh, don't be stupid!" She spoke like a boy. "We've got to think of the goat."

It sounded so absurd when uttered that they laughed simultaneously.

"Well, do look out for his horns," he warned her. "I'd sooner you went back to the path."

"Matches, please?"

He gave in.

She waited for a breeze to pass.

"Now!" She struck a light and held it, sheltered in her hands, till the flame lit up the narrow space.

There followed a tense moment as Weir exerted all his strength. The match went out and in the darkness it seemed to Clodagh that she was involved in a heaving, flank, and furry mass as she rolled over, gasping for breath.

Weir's voice pierced her stupor.

"Are you *hurt*?"

She opened her eyes, to see him, on his knees beyond her, his face anxious.

"No!" she panted. "Only—winded! What did he do?"

"Bowled us over. Ungrateful brute!" He scrambled up on to his feet. "You're sure it's all right?"

"Yes. Help me up!" She held out her hands. Her hat had fallen on to her neck, and a loose lock of hair was blinding her. She was covered with wet sand, and a long rent showed in one stocking.

Weir drew her gently on to her feet.

"I'm *so* sorry."

"I'm not. Where's the goat?"

"Heaven knows!"

As if in answer to the query, from the heights above came a hoarse bleat. It sounded triumphant and derisive.

Clodagh gave way to helpless mirth. Weir joined in and they laughed till they cried.

"Well, *he's* all right!" She wiped her eyes. "But I wish he'd left me a few hair-pins." She removed her hat impatiently and down came her hair like a dark cloud.

Weir's eyes were fixed on it.

"You'll never forgive me for this," he said.

"Forgive you?" She paused in the midst of securing the heavy mass. "I'm going to make you pay penance—take me for some more walks! I don't get adventures like this alone. Will you?" she asked simply.

He was brushing the sand off her hat, his head lowered. It seemed to her that he prolonged the trifling task in a vain effort to find some excuse.

"In the evenings," she supplemented. "It won't interfere with your work then. Or mine," she added lightly. "You don't know how nice it is to talk English. I get so tired of struggling along in Italian. Of course there's Mr. Edge, but he lives so far away. I find it rather lonely sometimes."

"You must." He handed back her hat, hesitating. "I should like it. Only—I'm poor company. I don't know why you want me to come. I mean——" He broke off helplessly.

"Don't you?" She smiled. "Well, we both love music. If you want me to be perfectly honest, I'd like to talk shop! Although I know that you're miles ahead of me. I only wish *I* could compose. Besides, between my lessons and practice and learning Italian and mending my clothes"—she stuck out her foot with a rueful look at the widening "ladder" in her stocking—"I can't really explore till the evenings and it's rather eerie work alone. Now, are you satisfied? And will you take me to-morrow night to see that grotto you spoke about?"

"I will, with pleasure."

"Good!" She laughed and moved towards the path beyond them. "If I don't hurry home now I shall be locked out. Luigi will think I'm lost."

"Well, remember the loose stones," said Weir. Awkwardly he offered his arm. She slipped her hand lightly through it.

"Tell me the legend you spoke about. The finding of the Rosary?"

"Don't you know it?" He was surprised. "It's so much a part of the island that I wonder you haven't come across it. You know, of course, there was a convent where the lake now is. It was famous in more ways than one. In the days of Queen Joanna it had the reputation of being a fashionable retreat for ladies tired out by the follies of Court. Religion was rather a minor issue. I don't know if Boccaccio came here, but the atmosphere would have pleased him. Connected by underground passages was a grotto containing the fountain that gave its name to the town. It was the scene of midnight revels to which both sexes were admitted. At last, under a certain Abbess of high birth but deplorable morals, the scandal reached its height and judgment descended from on high. It took the form of a terrible earthquake. According to the old legend the road to hell was opened up and the convent went down with

all its inmates. The devil safe-guarded his front door by filling up the way with water. *Therefore* the lake is bottomless! It's all logical and convincing; at any rate, to the peasants." He paused for breath as they reached the space where the path joined the one to his Villa.

"So that's why the devil lives there," said Clodagh. "And the grotto is all that's left—the one that you're taking me to see?"

"No, the shrine belongs to a different epoch," Weir explained. "When the convent went down, the Rosary—a sacred relic which belonged to the order—vanished too. But a century later it was recovered, through a miracle vouchsafed to a goatherd. Wandering, one night, on the hill-side, he saw a mysterious light shining at the mouth of a cave. He approached it, trembling, and discovered the famous Rosary in the midst of a bush, the moon playing on the jewels. He fled to inform the priest and there was general rejoicing. The relic was borne in state to the church, where it's still shown to the congregation on days of high festival, and a shrine was erected in the grotto that marked the scene of the miracle."

"But how did it get there," asked Clodagh, "if it went down with the convent?"

"I can't imagine. It doesn't do to question legends." There was mischief in Weir's voice. "I once unwisely suggested to Edge that the priest might have inspired the goatherd; also that it wasn't proved to be the identical rosary. There was no one living to confirm this. Religion was at a low ebb through the scandal connected with the Church, the right moment for a miracle. But what does it matter? The main thing is that the grotto has brought consolation and hope to peasants in need of it. It's full of humble offerings for prayers granted, a sight, to my mind, more impressive and pathetic than the garish splendour of the church

Although, mind you "—his voice changed—" that's an uncommonly fine organ. No, I didn't mean to be irreligious," for Clodagh had laughed, " only it struck me that I was being rather ungrateful. The padre lets me play sometimes."

" Yes, I've heard you," said Clodagh. " I spent my first afternoon in Siris listening to you, in a seat near the font, and wondering who the organist was with a penchant for Brahms and Liszt. I was feeling rather depressed too, and you lifted the cloud for me."

" Did I ? " He gave her a swift glance. " I can't picture you depressed." As she did not respond, he continued: " You must ' wish away ' whatever caused it when we go to the grotto. It's a sort of holy wishing-well. The shrine has the reputation of granting the first request brought to it by a pilgrim."

" Have you tried it ? " she asked.

Weir shook his head.

" I'm afraid my faith is insufficient. Besides, I've really nothing to ask."

The words were uttered carelessly, but Clodagh had a swift vision of the hopelessness that lay behind them.

" Then I shall ask something for you," she told him. Unconsciously her light hold tightened on his sleeve.

" What will you ask ? " His voice was nervous.

" Oh, if I tell you it won't come true ! " They had reached the corner of her road and she halted with an upward look at the house that seemed to be sleeping, shuttered and silent, high above them. Smiling, she slipped her hand from his arm and held it out to him. " Good night, Mr. Wauchope, and thank you for seeing me home. To-morrow, then, for another adventure ! Shall I meet you in the same place ? It's no good your coming out of your way."

" Please. By the pillar at half-past eight ? " He welcomed the arrangement. He had no wish to approach

Luigi and be shown into the restaurant. "I shall be there. You can count on me."

The last words echoed in her ears as she climbed up the steep incline. The door was still open. On the threshold she turned and looked back. Weir stood, half-hidden in the shadows, on guard, waiting to see she was safe.

She waved to him and passed in, to be welcomed and scolded by Teresina:

"*Dio mio!*" Her voice was anxious. "The Signora should not be out alone at this hour of the night. Who knows what *mala gente* are abroad!"

"But I was with a friend," said Clodagh. "The *Inglese* who lives at the Torre del Moro."

Teresina's lips parted, then closed again. She shrugged her shoulders; the slow shrug which has nothing in common with the gesture that belongs to the French. There was pity in it and open wonder.

"The Signora is good," she said gravely. "The Saints, doubtless, will reward her."

CHAPTER XXI

THE evening walk became a habit. Slowly and perseveringly Clodagh broke through Weir's defences. To her own surprise, she began to look forward to their long talks as much as to the sense of adventure in exploring the island under his guidance, in the friendly darkness that loosened his tongue. He supplied a need in her life hitherto undetected; that of a ready listener, quick to discern the trend of her thought, imaginative and fond of discussion. With Ian, in their happiest days, if Clodagh drifted beyond the few subjects of interest to himself, he would quickly show that he was bored. But Weir was more catholic in his tastes. He had read deeply and he had travelled; music was not their only link, and there was a stronger factor than this in the growing friendship between them, a fundamental honesty that lifted them above convention. He never agreed through a wish to please her. In many ways he was a rebel, defying orthodox opinion. But he backed his heresies by logic where Clodagh jumped to conclusions and this put her on her mettle. Unconsciously he was teaching her to reason, formulate her ideas, and mistrust a purely feminine outlook.

It led to hot argument at times, but Weir had a steady control of his temper and a sense of humour which saved the pair from any suspicion of a quarrel. The man was not warped by his misfortunes but eaten up with loneliness.

On one point he was resolute; he would not meet

her in the daytime. With all his sensitive soul he shrank from inflicting his distorted face on the eyes that would glow at the sight of beauty. If love could not stand the test, he reasoned, remembering Lady Somerby, what chance remained for a new-born friendship? Although they never spoke of it, he made his intention clear to her. The full moon, too, he avoided. It invariably synchronized with a desire on his part to finish some "important work"! Clodagh would accept the excuse, aware of the true reason.

"But I shan't always," she decided. "He oughtn't to be buried in Siris. I mean to stir his ambition. He should take his place in the world."

She had little time now to brood on the problem of her own future, though it cropped up with the weekly mails and also with the question of money. If she decided to cut adrift, defy Ian, and live abroad, her slender allowance was insufficient as a lever to success. It could not include singing-lessons as well as her board and lodging, however much she might stint the latter.

The old question of being supported; the portionless English girl of gentle birth with an education that led to nothing except marriage. She was one of thousands brought into the world heedlessly and denied the training which alone could secure her independence, expected to wait, patiently, until some man should desire her and offer a home in return for her submission to his will.

Even the Italian peasant was better off in this respect. She brought her *dot* into the marriage and it lent her an air of dignity. From the start, she met the man who owned her on equal terms and held a share in decisions that affected their domestic life. She could work by his side too, gathering the olives and grapes, a wage-earner, co-equal.

With the exaggeration of youth, Clodagh decided that work alone could raise the *moral* of her sex; she ignored the other side of the question, the women who exploited

men. Weir was to broaden her views on the subject.

On the night when their conversation first touched upon marriage, they had tramped to the farthest point of the island and settled down for a rest. It was the dim light that Weir loved, with a young moon and the glow of stars. The tideless sea lay at their feet. Where it broke against a black rock that jutted out from the shore, the spray rose like silver lace in a pattern for ever changing. Beyond the rock were violet shadows and the sky was a deep and mystic blue. Against it, on a low ridge crowning the little bay, a broken line of almond-trees in blossom seemed weighed down with snow, their delicate pink effaced by the moonshine, leaving a foam of silver petals.

Clodagh's gaze slowly turned to the crescent enclosing the wine-coloured sea.

"It's like a Japanese print to-night. Beautiful, but unreal." She shifted her position slightly, where she lay on the pebbly beach, to take in the features of the shore. "Even the perspective's faulty; that boat-house much too large compared to the cottage in the foreground."

"But it's so typical," Weir mused from his post of vantage above her, perched on a flat rock. "The primitive outlook of the South. The larger structure holds a boat, and the cottage three generations: a fisherman, his mother and wife and I forget how many children! They'd never dream of enlarging the house. They've always lived there, a matter of custom. Some day the grandmother will die and the eldest son will bring home a bride."

"Is it poverty or indifference?"

"Both. If they had any money over, it would go in better food—or gambling! But they're probably knee-deep in debt; the curse of modern Italy that does nothing to check usury. At exorbitant interest too, everything mortgaged up to the hilt. That's why so many of the men go off to America. They can earn big wages there

and send money home to their parents, on the verge of starvation. They come back with their pockets full, marry, and start all over again. A bad harvest invariably sends them to the money-lenders."

"But who lends if they're all so poor?" She smiled as Weir snapped his fingers.

"Foreign scum! Armenians mainly." His voice betrayed his disgust. "That man who owns the big café next door to the church is one. You know? The Café Mazzini. He holds half Siris in his web. He sits in a dark little hole behind the bar and transacts business, very sleek, immensely 'Christian'; a thoroughgoing hypocrite. I had some dealings with him once—when I bought the Torre del Moro. Though I hold no brief for the Turk, I'm inclined to think that behind those chronic massacres lie centuries of extortion. It's the old story of the pogroms; money the root of the evil, religious differences the cloak. The Italian never looks ahead. All he asks for is food to-day. So he falls an easy victim to the wily Armenian."

"And I've always pitied them!" said Clodagh.

"Well, you can. They've been cruelly scourged, the innocent as well as the guilty. But it's just as well to consider both sides of a case. Though, as it happens, I'm biased, because I love Italy. Her peasants, those undefiled by towns, are the gentlemen of Europe."

Clodagh nodded.

"I quite agree. They always seem so happy too, despite the cruel poverty; so satisfied with simple pleasures. Listen!" She held up a hand to check Weir, about to speak.

At the end of the straggling hamlet was a vine-wreathed *osteria*. Some one had started to play a guitar and, above the thrum of the strings, rose rich and sonorous voices in the familiar "Tripoli." The song, with its soldiers' chorus, swept, a wave of sensuous sound, across the silence of the night. It was followed by the dull thud of hand

hat beat on the crowded tables under the pergola, and a udden shout of laughter.

" *Why* are they so happy ? " asked Clodagh.

" The climate and a simple life. Sunshine, work in the pen, varied by spells of idleness, the perpetual hope of *l Lotto*, cheap wine, and "—he grinned—" a diet that xcludes meat and saves them probably from gout ! "

" How horrible ! On a night like this." Clodagh esented the conclusion. " *I* believe it's the beauty round them and the success they make of marriage."

" In what way ? " His eyes narrowed, watching her ivid face.

She began to enunciate her views. Weir listened vithout interruption.

" So that's your idea," he said at length. " It seems o me a bit one-sided. What about the men who work ll their lives to support women who look on their hus-ands as mere machines to pay for their clothes and musements ? And all this talk of ' possession.' Can nything be more possessive and tyrannical than a ealous wife ? Just put yourself in the place of a man ho can't even speak to a girl without arousing his ife's suspicion, and whose bachelor friends come under ne ban. The ownership is on both sides." His voice eld a trace of bitterness. " It's true that I've never een married, but I was once engaged, for a year. To a ery lovely woman, in many ways too good for me, but ho never trusted me out of her sight. It was tempera-aental ; she couldn't help it. All the same, hard to ear. I'm only telling you this to show you that possession ' works both ways."

Clodagh was inwardly amazed at this sidelight on Lady omerby, but a memory from the past rose up and onfirmed Weir's statement : the glance of disdain ne had cast at the girl on the night of the Molesworths' nce and the abrupt departure of the handsome couple om the room.

Jealous—to this absurd point? A woman who grudged each look of her lover and yet could callously dismiss him when the war had robbed him of his attraction. She started; Weir was speaking again:

"In another way I agree with you. Marriage has not moved with the times. No man or woman has the right to own another individual. It's mental and moral servitude. But I don't think it's only a question of money, your idea of women being 'bought.' It's a want of mutual trust and respect. If I married now—if I *could* marry," he corrected the phrase calmly, "I should neither bind nor expect to be bound by any orthodox convention. As an instance, if my wife wished to travel, she wouldn't have to ask my permission. She could go away for as long as she liked. If she loved me, she would return. If not, where's the use of keeping her caged? I should expect the same liberty. It's this pernicious *habit* of marriage, the eternal living side by side without any hope of escape that turns a home into a prison. Why, no friendship could stand it, so what do we expect of love? But to leave each free you must have trust, and women are naturally suspicious."

"Because they're handicapped," Clodagh retorted, "by the English laws. Men needn't be faithful. They aren't punished, like women. So wives have no real hold. Unless they can prove cruelty, there's no chance of a divorce. And we call ourselves civilized! How would you like," she asked Weir, "to be obliged to live with a woman whom you *knew* to be unfaithful and who also had the right to cut down every penny at home and spend the larger part of the income on a man who was her lover? Yet many women have suffered this from their husbands without redress, for the sake of their children."

Weir nodded.

"I see your point; that they've less ground for confidence because the Divorce laws are unequal. Of course

hey were framed on the old idea of property and inheri-tance. A man must be sure that the children are his. That's what it amounts to. Still, you must remember, you're quoting from exceptional cases. All men aren't unfaithful. To begin with, a man must love pretty deeply before he decides to relinquish his freedom. But I agree with you that our laws of divorce need revision."

"Well, I'm glad you admit that!" said Clodagh. She was silent for a moment, thinking over his earlier speech. "What becomes of the children," she asked him, "under your scheme of liberty? Can a wife, too, run away and leave them when she gets tired of being domestic? I suppose they fall to *her* share—like the trouble of having them!"

"If she doesn't want them, she shouldn't have them." Weir's voice was obstinate.

Clodagh laughed.

"Easily said! Supposing the husband thought otherwise?"

"Then we're back in the same vicious circle of ownership and tyranny. I've very decided views on that point." For the first time he hesitated. "I don't know what you'd think of them."

"Tell me?" She picked up a smooth pebble absently and examined it, her face averted. "Say what you like."

"Well, under present-day conditions, unless two people desire a child with all their heart and can see their way to give it the care it needs and a proper start in life, I think it's very wrong to have one. And since the mother is most important to its welfare, and it's *her* health that suffers, she should hold the casting vote. It's all part of my notion of freedom. I think we've reached, too, a stage in the history of the world when birth should no longer be accidental. What every race needs now is quality not quantity in its output of citizens."

Clodagh dropped the stone on her lap and looked up at the speaker, surprised.

"But I've always heard that the strength of a nation depended on a high birth-rate?"

"So it does, in times of war; a question of filling the gaps in an army. And isn't that a horrible thought? To bring children into the world for the purposes of slaughter. But if the peace we're striving for is achieved—say, a ten years' pact—there'll be a new problem before us, that of over-population. We've reduced the death-rate enormously both in infancy and old age; there's less infant mortality and people live far longer. What is to preserve the balance? As it is, we can't house the nation, and look at our host of unemployed? There are no new continents to explore, and half of Europe is bankrupt. The new generation will have to face infinite competition. Your girl who scorns to 'wait for marriage' and expects a training and a trade will add to the latter factor." Weir smiled as he spoke. "But the worst trouble of all to my mind is that, by an ironical paradox, our very care to prolong life and preserve it may *produce* war. Certainly over-population was the cause of the last."

"The cause?" Clodagh looked indignant. "The real cause was Germany's ruthless desire for conquest."

"I agree. But behind it," said Weir, "lay the need for expansion. That gave the militarists their excuse. And behind that again the submission of women, the tyranny of ownership. The German wife was indeed a 'chattel,' doomed to endless child-bearing. It permeated all classes. The cry was: 'More sons—more soldiers for the Kaiser!' The girls didn't count save as putative mothers. The population went on increasing in a country rigidly encircled. So again they cast their eyes on France; war—another Alsace-Lorraine!"

"But in England we're not encircled. We have our huge colonies."

"Yes," Weir suggested, "so huge that they're growing nto nations, splitting off from the parent branch. Will hey always welcome our surplus children, remittance nen, and home failures? Why should they provide an asylum for them? No, to my mind, what lies before us s an attempt to improve the race. But we still hide nertia under facile sentiment!" He struck the rock with his hand. "Look at our alien population and the outcrop of our slums? The rickety babies, underfed, he degenerate and mentally deficient. They can't work; they're innocent martyrs to overcrowding, vice, and drink. They're a tax on those who do work, the hard-driven rate-payer. They fill our prisons and asylums eventually, the worst cases. But the others wander unchecked through the land, irresponsibles, doing endless harm and, unluckily, having endless offspring. You have only to pick up an English paper to find some unfortunate woman murdered or child lured from its home by a man whom the jury finds 'insane.' In America hey're taking steps to deal with this class and segregate hem. But England won't wake up! Not until disaster s on us. Then we pull through—by sheer grit." His mind went back to the war. "But at what a cost of suffering!"

Silence succeeded Weir's outburst. Clodagh was thinking hard, cheeks flushed, eyes shining as she stared ahead over the sea. She was moved by his enthusiasm, yet aware of an instinct to criticize certain points in his argument. Yet, here again, doubt crept in. For how little he knew of the big issues stirring the world outside Keyn Magna.

How cramped her life had been with Ian! She tried, or a moment, to imagine what he would say to Weir's proposition anent "accidental" children.

"He'd be shocked to think that I could discuss it." She smiled with a touch of scorn. "Above all, with a man whom I've only known for a few weeks. That's

why he didn't approve of the Logues really, though he said he liked them." A thought struck her. "They'd get on with Weir. They belong to the same plane, as dear old Edge would say. I only wish they lived in Siris. That would make my life here perfect."

The man above her glanced at his watch, and slipped down off the rock.

"Time we were making a move," he told her. "I hope I haven't been boring you—or, worse still, too outspoken." He looked at her whimsically. "I always forget you're not a man."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said!" Her candid eyes were raised to his. "And you couldn't bore me. You know that; or you ought to, by this time! Must we go?" She rose to her feet and stood for a moment regretfully, drinking in the expanse of water. "Is that a low cloud or an island, that black line in mid-sea?"

"I wondered if you'd discover it." Weir gave a little chuckle. "It's an island, a favourite haunt of mine. I once spent a week-end there, imitating Robinson Crusoe until my supply of fresh water gave out. Slept in a cave and lived on fish, fresh-caught, and ship biscuits."

"What fun! I'd love to go there. Couldn't you take me in your boat?"

"Too far." He turned away.

She made a little grimace at his back, aware of his real reason.

"I shall have to fall back on Mr. Edge! But I can't picture him catching fish and grilling it over a gipsy fire. I'd sooner go with you."

"It's nothing to see." His voice was careless. "Just a handful of rocks, the home of birds. And it's not always easy to return. If the wind drops, you're marooned. I wouldn't risk it."

Clodagh frowned.

" You're treating me like a woman now ! You seem to think I can't rough it."

" And supposing you had to stay all night, caught a chill and lost your voice ? "

" Oh, very well ! I'll ask Mr. Edge."

" Yes, you'd be safer on his yacht." Unmoved by her little touch of pique, he held out a hand to help her up on to the path above them. " Now then, we must step out, or Teresina will scold you."

At a brisk pace they followed the road that soon gave place to a narrow track winding upwards through the vines, silent, splashed with heavy shadows, mysterious in the dim light. Once Clodagh gave a start and clutched Weir's arm as a dark streak crossed their path, swift and noiseless, muzzle pointed, belly to earth.

" What was that ? " she asked in a whisper.

" A fox," said Weir. " The ' little foxes that steal the grapes.' Is that right ? I'm not good at quotations. More likely on the prowl for a chicken. Listen ? "

They paused. Far away, they could hear the bark of a dog with a fierce, growling undernote.

" Too much for Reynard ! He made off. Those farm dogs are ugly customers. That's why I won't take short cuts. They're generally loose at night." He paused for a moment and pointed downhill to a patch of wooded ground. " See that flicker among the trees there ? Charcoal-burners at work. It takes three days and three nights, stoking all the time, to keep the furnace at white heat. It's a picturesque sight. Shall we go there one evening ? "

" I should love to." She drew in a deep breath of the cool, aromatic air. " One never gets to the end of Siris. There's always something new to see."

Weir laughed.

" You're easy to please. What the French would call *'si curieuse,'* which has not the offensive English sense.

What do you do with all your impressions? " he asked her teasingly.

" I hoard them," said Clodagh, smiling. Her face changed, became wistful. " I may be glad of them some day."

A little shiver ran over her. She straightened her shoulders, and moved on, resisting unconsciously the suggestion of prophecy in the speech.

CHAPTER XXII

SIRIS bubbled with excitement, for the first quails had arrived. For weeks past the southern shore had been prepared for their reception with long lines of twelve-foot poles, cunningly screened by leaves and boughs between which hung the treacherous nets. The birds, following their leaders, exhausted by the sustained flight across the water in the night, would fall, stunned, to the ground, at the mercy of their captors.

Clodagh thought it a cruel trick, utterly unsportsmanlike. Still there was an excuse for it: cheap food throughout the island. When she met Toni in the town and he grinned at her in his friendly fashion, dived into his pocket and produced a quivering mass of feathers from which emerged a speckled head, her hand went to her purse and she forgot Weir's counsel. All the way back to Luigi's, she held the little frightened bird cupped in her hands, too weary to struggle, feeling the quick beat of its heart. To come so far with its marvellous instinct, in search of green leaves and water, from the African sand, and fall a prey to human greed, seemed to her a tragedy!

But Luigi thought otherwise. Would the Signora like it for dinner? A pity it wasn't fatter!

For the first time she was vexed with her landlord.

Teresina, more tactful, contrived a cage for the foundling, but the question of food was disconcerting. They tried bread-crumbs, then worms. The quail drooped visibly. Clodagh was glad when the evening brought

Weir, punctual at the broken pillar. She poured out her troubles to him.

"I believe they live on insects and grain," he told her. "The best thing we can do is to take your little friend to the reed beds and let him fend for himself."

Back they went to Luigi's.

"Come up and fetch him," she suggested. "You've never seen my little room and the view from the balcony." She swept aside his excuses and he followed her unwillingly up the stairs and across the deserted restaurant. "In here!" She unlocked the door.

The draught from the open window blew a postcard to his feet from among a pile of letters. On it was printed a photograph of the Manor, deep in snow. As Weir bent to retrieve it, he saw written across the corner: "A happy Christmas! With Ian's love."

Rather hurriedly, he returned it to the owner.

"That's where I used to live," she told him. "Doesn't it look wintry? Especially for the West Country. We don't often get such snow."

Weir, thus challenged, examined the picture.

"It must be a fine old house," he said.

"Yes, but damp." Her voice was careless. "The trees in the drive are coated with lichen and everything smells mouldy. I don't mind the cold, but that moist warmth makes me feel suffocated."

"Still, England's beautiful," said Weir. He spoke rather wistfully. "If you lived here, you'd get tired of the glare and long for clouds and cool shade."

"It's not so beautiful as this." She led the way to the balcony and made room for him by her side. "Isn't it like being in a nest? In some high cliff above Siris."

He stood there, silently drinking it in: the steep descent, the broken wall and far beneath them, the drop to the sea, indigo like the starry sky.

"You could almost take a dive," he said. "It reminds me of something I was reading just before I came out.

Browning on Calvano. Not so many leagues away." He thought for a moment before he quoted:

"'And God's own profound
Was above me, and round me the mountains,
And under, the sea.'

"Though the rest of the stanza leaves me cold:

"'And within me, my heart to bear witness
What was and shall be!'

Browning was always so sure of the future, an annoying trait in a poet. It must have puzzled little Fortù, if he had a soul above green figs."

"Then you *do* approve of my view," said Clodagh. Her visitor laughed.

"Didn't I say so? It's all you promised me, and more. What about the starving bird?"

"I'll get it." She passed through the room behind them.

Weir, leaning on the rail, heard a piteous exclamation and turned to see Clodagh, her face tragic, standing in the open doorway.

"It's dead."

"No?" He went to meet her.

She held out the tiny corpse.

"Perhaps it's as well," he said gently. "It would probably have been recaptured." With a finger he touched the ruffled feathers and, looking up, saw tears in her eyes.

"It's silly of me." She bit her lip.

"I don't think so." He pulled a chair forward to the window. "Come and sit down. We won't go out for a walk to-night if you'll let me stay here and talk to you." He took the dead bird from her. "When I get home I'll bury him under the vines in my garden. He'll be happy there."

Clodagh nodded gratefully, ashamed of her sudden weakness.

"Such a little thing—and that brave journey! I ought to have known how to feed it."

"You can't mother everybody." Weir settled himself at her feet, his back against the window-frame, his injured cheek screened from her. "But if you feel in that generous mood, talk to me about England. That postcard made me home-sick! I haven't been there since the war."

"Not once?"

"No. When I got my discharge, I wandered South, spent the winter at Amalfi, and came here, quite by accident. I'd been to see the temples at Pæstum and I spent the night at Salerno. Drifting round the harbour next day, I made friends with a sailor whose mother lived on the island. He was waiting for the boat to take him there for his leave and he had a smattering of English—I couldn't speak Italian then. He told me there was good fishing, so I threw in my lot with him. And here I've stayed," he concluded.

"But you won't be content with it for ever," Clodagh suggested.

"Why not? It's a perfect climate—as temperate as Sicily—and I've learnt to tune my own piano! What more can a man want? As it happens, I'm a free agent. My mother died during the war. I've no other relations I care for and no ties to drag me home."

"Not even——" She hesitated, thinking of his compositions, but afraid to tread on delicate ground, since he posed as an amateur.

Weir confused her intention.

"My old romance?" His voice was steady. "That's over—utterly. She was a woman of the world, very lovely and popular. I should only have been a drag on her. I saw that in hospital. She came over to Etaples and"—he seemed to be searching for words—"we decided on a clean break. Far better. Looking back, I don't think it would have meant happiness. Even if

I'd escaped the war. By the way, there's a thing I've always wanted to ask you, Lady Strangway. No one knows where I am exactly ; I don't wish people to guess." Aware of his slip, he covered it clumsily with an excuse : " What's the use ? I bar letters and especially answering them. You understand, don't you ? "

" Thoroughly." She smiled gravely. " And I promise to preserve your secret when I return to England. But that won't be yet, if at all."

It was Weir's turn to feel surprise. He had concluded that Clodagh was separated from her husband, since she seemed to be living alone and never referred to Sir Ian. He knew the latter by name. The postcard with its signed message had destroyed this earlier impression. Little he guessed that Clodagh possessed the facts of his own life and that he had just given her the missing link, in the chain of events ; that of Lady Somerby's visit to France.

" He won't return," thought Clodagh, " because he knows that it would stamp her in the eyes of her set. He has promised her to remain hidden. No one knows what has happened ; of his terrible disfigurement. So, through his own quixotism, he's wasting his life in Siris."

She turned impulsively to him.

" I wasn't thinking of your engagement but your *work* when I said you ought to go back."

He answered her rather jerkily :

" Oh, as to that, I've an agent. I've published a few trifles through him. He understands it better than I do." He changed the subject abruptly. " The boat's in. I went down to meet it, as I was expecting a case of books. So there'll be some literature for you ! You must borrow what you like. You'll find them in my room to-morrow. Just take what you want."

" May I ? How nice ! Are there any novels ? "

" A few." Weir smiled. He did not tell her that

his list had been revised for her sake since his taste did not turn to fiction. "There are some magazines, as well."

"What a temptation! I shan't practise, and then the *maestro* will scold me. Yesterday," she told him, "I gave myself a whole holiday and went off in the yacht with Mr. Edge. Such a lovely expedition."

"Where did you get to?" Weir was watching the changes in her vivid face, the light that came and went in the wide hazel eyes and the mouth with its soft and youthful lips that would droop into tragedy over the dead bird and then lift with mischievous laughter. How she loved life! What was the secret of her lonely sojourn in Siris? He awoke to the fact that she was speaking.

"Paola?" He caught the word. "What is there to see there?"

"A quaint old town and the monastery and church of a fifteenth-century saint. Another St. Francis," she added vaguely. "The one who was sent for by Louis XI to cure him of his melancholy. Just picture the journey in those times; for a man who loved solitude? All the way by sea to Plessis, to be met at Amboise by the Dauphin with a purse of ten thousand crowns, and to live as an honoured guest at the gay French Court. After Paola! A man, too, of obscure birth and so humble that he refused to call himself a 'Lesser Friar,' like St. Francis of Assisi, but named his following 'Minimites.'"

"The lowest of all," Weir reflected. "It almost amounts to pride! I suppose it was really discipline? I think I prefer our friend of Assisi and his love for the little birds." His mind reverted to the quail and he went on rather quickly, "So Edge spared you Ancient Greece and stuck to Church History?"

"Oh, no." She gave him a mischievous glance. "We called at another place, Sapri, in a wonderful bay, on our way home and there he became a thorough pagan!

It's full of old Grecian remains. We waded in ancient lore, or rather I paddled after, feeling hopelessly ignorant." She clasped her hands round her knees and smiled down at the listening man. "Tell me something—in confidence! Who were the Cro-Magnons?"

He shook his head.

"I give it up! Is it a riddle?"

Her laugh rang out.

"What a relief! Then they're *not* a normal part of one's education?"

"Not mine. But you're latest from school. The Cro—what?"

"Magnons," laughed Clodagh. "So far as I could gather, they lived on the North shores of the Mediterranean and left 'remains' in Mentone. Remains that prove them to have been a wonderful race. Supermen, possessed of ancient mysteries, and the forerunners of the Greeks. The gods, in fact, of later days, rendered immortal by the legends of their prowess and their wisdom. I rather like the idea, don't you?" A dreamy look came into her face. "To think that the gods really existed. But how can people *know*?" she asked.

"Did you question Edge?" Weir was amused.

"Yes, but he didn't make it clear. And before I'd mastered the first subject I was whirled away on another flight. He thinks that the Cro-Magnons might solve the mysterious allusions in Genesis to the 'sons of God' who lived on earth and married 'the daughters of men'; that it points to an earlier creation, beings before Adam and Eve. I got quite dizzy, travelling backwards at that pace!"

"But how like Edge!" Weir chuckled. "I can see him, hot-foot in pursuit of a clue supplied by his wild imagination. What was your summing-up?"

"I shan't tell you. I came to grief."

"Oh, do?" He pleaded like a boy. "I swear I'll never mention it."

"Sure?" A dimple appeared in her cheek. "I thought myself so clever too! I merely suggested that if the Cro-Magnons were the gods of Ancient Greece, they had plenty of goddesses of their own. No need to run after the 'daughters of men'!"

"But that's just what they *did*." Weir chuckled, watching her.

"I know. All the nymphs and shepherdesses and the 'frail mortals' they pursued. Mr. Edge explained carefully that this intermarriage was the probable cause of the Cro-Magnons' deterioration. After that, I held my tongue! He's frightfully excited about it. It's to form a part of his present book on the link between legend and religion."

"Oh, poor old chap!" Weir frowned. "I do hope he'll be saved from further romantic folly. You should have seen the reviews that wiped out his last volume! He writes so admirably too, such fine and nervous English, but a hopeless confusion of fancy and fact. He's a dreamer. He ought to have been a poet and he calls himself an historian and archæologist!"

"Well, anyhow, every one loves him," said Clodagh, "and that's better than being famous."

"Is it?" Weir spoke teasingly, "Better than being a leading *prima donna*, for instance?"

"Or writing a wonderful opera?" She caught him up rebelliously.

"I was asking you the question," he parried.

She stared past him, frowning a little, at the valley beneath, veiled in shadows.

"I suppose it is." Her voice was grudging. "Still, work is a fine thing too."

Weir scrambled to his feet.

"Yes, and, if I keep you up, you'll be too tired to sing to-morrow. No, you're not to see me out. I can find my way in the dark—like a cat! Good night. Go to bed and dream that the gods are watching Edge in

mazement from the heights of Olympus as he digs for heir bones in Magna Græcia."

"I wish I could. What a gorgeous dream!"

They parted on a note of laughter.

But long after she had watched him make his way own the narrow *vico* and turn at the corner to wave his and, she stood, staring into the night, fighting a doubt hat assailed her. Would work always be satisfying? he thought of her fellow-exiles in Siris, both admittedly nely men, each with a special talent, although that f Edge had run to waste. For the first time she looked head to the days when her voice must fail her. What ould remain, to fill the gap?

Friends, old as herself? But a life of work left little isure for tightening the bonds of friendship. She would and alone in the world, with her wreath of withered urels, belong to the past, like old Tiepi.

As she began to close the shutters, she heard in the illness, somewhere below her, the faint wail of a child; hen, the mother-voice, comforting—Teresina in her bour of love. Once again there came to Clodagh the istful pain she had felt as she looked down at the dead ird. So small and helpless. . . .

Impatiently, she gave herself a little shake.

"I'm absurd." She snapped the shutters together. I've outlived all that. What I ought to be thinking out now is the way I can earn enough to support yself in addition to my studies." She turned her mind the problem determinedly, but without inspiration.

Yet, when she slept, she dreamed of Ian, riding down long road that led to a sea full of rocks. She tried to arn him, saw him poised for a moment on the high ore; then, horse and rider plunged in, and she awoke a cry on her lips—to sunshine and Teresina, smiling ove her breakfast tray.

"*Buon giorno*, Signora. Three letters for her!" She nted to the little pile, propped against the coffee-pot.

" The Signora is not forgotten ! This rose, Luigi picked for her. It is sweet." She held it to Clodagh's face.

Clodagh took the half-open flower with a smile of thanks. A sudden memory came to her.

" And how is the little one to-day ? "

" He suffers. He cuts a big tooth, but it ends in sleep, the Madonna be praised ! "

" And you have hardly closed your eyes ? " She noticed the heavy shadows on the other's pale, olive skin.

Teresina looked surprised.

" *Ma*, Signora, I am accustomed."

All the patience of motherhood lay in the simple words. She straightened the tray and went on happily :

" He grows into a little man, as like Luigi as two peas in a pod ! Not beautiful," she added quickly with the object of placating Fortune, " but, as babies go, none so bad." Her white teeth flashed out in a sudden smile of comprehension as her glance met Clodagh's. " The Signora is fond of children ? " Her eyes asked a further question and as swiftly guessed the answer. " Not yet ? *Pazienza !* The Signora is young. She should go to the Sacred Grotto and ask the Madonna to grant her prayer. That was how my first arrived—a true child of the Rosary." A sudden wave of timidity succeeded the confidence. " *Scusi*, Signora, the coffee grows cold." She was off, light-footed, apologetic.

Clodagh filled her thick cup to the brim absently. As she sipped the contents, rich with its goat's milk—an acquired taste that ever after makes the usual *café au lait* insipid—there was sadness in her heart.

How simple life seemed to be to Teresina and her kind. Love, marriage, children, work. Had Luigi always been faithful ? And if not— She dismissed the thought. Their devotion was plain to see ; it must stand on a firm basis. Besides, it had survived the test of the long years of separation. Absence, the greatest test of all. Her lips curled bitterly.

Those days at Albrey, the sunshine and peace, after ne months of suffering that marriage had brought to er. A few weeks of rest from duty—and Ian had urned to another woman.

His writing lay on the topmost letter. Beneath it as one from Margot. She guessed the contents and iscounted them. In her action as she tossed the letters n to the end of the bed, was all the contempt she felt or the narrow village life, under the Strangway rule, full f pompous pretence and petty gossip; above all, for ne inquiries regarding her own health and the date of er return.

"If they really want me back," she thought, "it's ecause they've quarrelled or Ian finds that the mistress f his house is useful. Aunt Helen's just as bad, wilfully lind, fond of comfort. The only one I respect in the hole lot is my mother-in-law. She has never written ne a line! She's consistent; a good hater. There's no ypocrisy or weakness in her stony attitude. She blames ne." A faint smile crossed her lips. "Well, at least, 'm affording her the pleasure of living up to her poor pinion."

She picked up the remaining letter and examined the ng envelope directed in a clerkly hand. It was sealed nd the flap bore the imprint of a firm of London solicitors. he name seemed vaguely familiar.

She opened it and drew out a stiff sheet, folded in three. Ier eyes skimmed the commencement, couched in the ilted, obscure terms of legal phraseology. Then a ngle line caught her attention. She gasped; her heart ropped a beat.

"Re estate of Miss Adeline Desmond, deceased."

At first her brain refused to act. Slowly the truth ame home to her. Aunt Addy *dead*? It couldn't be. e read on, stunned, incredulous. "Sole legatee." hat did it mean?

In the midst of her pain and perplexity, she realized not only loss but gain ; a gift from the dead. The letter was a charter of freedom. Aunt Addy had made her independent.

CHAPTER XXIII

LA PINA lived in a two-roomed hut not far from the Torre del Moro, with a little garden that ran down o the edge of the town wall. Clodagh, passing the open oorway, had often seen the old woman sitting in the ıade inside, bent over her basket-work. She would ance up with fierce black eyes, aggressive as a startled awk's, her sunken lips faintly derisive, as her brown ngers moved nimbly, binding the twigs and strips of illow.

She had a brisk trade for her wares among the farmers ı market days. It was better to buy an unwanted asket than for the hens to cease laying, or the goats ın dry. Women would make the "sign of the horns" -index and little fingers pointing—surreptitiously, when ey met La Pina, and men look the other way. Even e children ran from her. For every one knew about argherita and the quarrel before her daughter's birth, e affair of the straying fowl that La Pina vowed was ıe of hers. La Pina had "overlooked" the mother; nce the child's crooked spine.

Then there was Carlo, the baker's son. Hidden behind rock, one night, he had thrown a stone at La Pina. vo days later, his father's mule had sickened mysteri-sly and died. Who would dispute facts like these? ndoubtedly the "evil eye."

It was wise to be polite to La Pina but give her a de berth; a woman who could read the future and ew all the secrets of the past. For fifty years, no

soul had crossed the threshold of her tiny house, save the priest, at rare intervals.

Clodagh had learnt her story from Weir; the commencement of her ill-fame. Long ago she had been the fairest bride in the island until that night when her husband, Ghito, had returned unexpectedly, to find Cesare, the handsome young fisherman, with La Pina in the shadowed garden. No one knew what had transpired until the *guardie* arrived on the scene, but the knife was undoubtedly Cesare's—that knife which had pierced Ghito's heart!

Cesare had vanished, with his boat—the latter detail unimportant. For hadn't Pasquale, returning late from an evening of *festa* in the town, seen a monstrous bird that flapped past him and over the hill to the sea? Magic assuredly; La Pina had "changed" her lover. For Cesare was never seen again, the law robbed of its prey.

Time only confirmed the story. Every one heard her say in the open market-place when Toni upset her basket (that boy was too fond of tricks!) that she would turn him into a pig. Yes, *brutto porco*, you couldn't mistake it! Francesco had gone to the priest about it and returned with a philtre of holy water to sprinkle over her frightened son. (And *that* had cost the grocer something! The *parroco* understood his business.) Anyhow it had saved Toni; though the beating might have helped, for the grocer was a strong man and the devil is always shy of the stick!

All this and more Clodagh had learnt, not only from Weir but from Teresina, marvelling at such superstition. It merely increased in her a longing to speak to the bitter old woman, but the latter never gave her a chance. Since Aunt Addy's death a month ago, age had seemed more pitiful; to live alone and die alone, leaving behind a memory that would pass like a summer cloud. In Miss Desmond's case there had been no tragedy in her

anner of death. Peacefully dozing before the fire in r chair, presumably convalescent, she had slipped into e eternal silence. So Rivers wrote in a blotted letter at testified to her own grief. Grim to the last, she d stood, at bay, over her mistress's possessions when e Heriots arrived for the funeral. They had deeply sented the terms of the will and the income left to odagh, and this was apparent in their letters. Aunt elen had done her best to secure for Margot the lion's are, but, with the resistance to coercion and the acumen old age, Miss Desmond had listened but left her will touched in favour of the niece who, poor, had never rrowed from her and, rich, had not stooped to patronage. r years she had been snubbed by her sister ; only the ange in their fortunes had brought Mrs. Heriot and r daughter to the little house at Richmond. Aunt ldy had seen through their manœuvres, though willing help them in the months when they were cramped by ath duties.

Clodagh was glad now to recall the many letters and le gifts sent off from Keyn Magna. It was her care the choice of the latter, more than their intrinsic value, at had warmed the little old lady's heart, without unding her Irish pride. She had revelled in the scriptions of Siris and Clodagh's last letter had lain side her when she fell asleep, never to wake.

The picture of the quiet room and Aunt Addy, knitting her chair, rose before Clodagh's eyes as she made her y to Weir's Villa one morning for her hour of practice. nt Addy had been the last link that bound her to her n country. Her plans were shaping steadily. She uld remain in Siris until the heat drove her north. e was tempted towards the Italian Lakes. A month laziness on their shores, then a winter in Rome of d work under some well-known master who could her a start in her profession. She promised herself oliday at Christmas in Siris—if funds permitted ?

There were death duties to consider. As soon as the legal business was settled, she would write to Ian: an ultimatum.

She foresaw that it would mean a battle and, possibly a pursuit; that Ian might come to Italy and demand explanations. Well, he should have them—he and Margot! But, inwardly, she shrank from the scene, though she held no doubts of his guilt. It was not only his passionate speech that had confirmed this in her mind but an earlier incident, which even now she thrust from her, with his lame explanations. In the light of after events it left no doubt of the pair's conduct.

Supposing he came to Siris?

Suddenly she thought of Weir and her promise to preserve his secret. Ian might know him by sight. It would never do for the men to meet. This meant a delay in the crisis. She must wait until she had left the island. For the first time it flashed across her that Ian might not approve of the friendships she had formed during her long visit; the lunches and yachting trips with Edge, the evening walks with Nigel Weir and her morning hours at his Villa. She knew the Strangway jealousy.

"Why, he might divorce *me*," she thought. "He'd have a very good case and it would be typical of the law's bias in favour of his sex. Besides, he'd have sufficient money to engage the best counsel." For a moment sickened, she saw herself, innocent, stripped of her reputation in that arena of the Courts spiritually more degrading than the old gladiatorial displays, and packed with men and fellow-women stirred by the basest form of excitement.

Civilization? Why, here in Siris there was more fair play and decency—— Her thought was checked midway by the action of a girl who came quickly toward her, passing a bent old figure in the centre of the path.

For the girl had swerved to avoid the shadow, grotesque in the sunshine, cast by the latter. Preserving her grace

ıl balance, the water-jar erect on her head, she bent deways, her bare feet gripping the rock, crossed her ngers, and spat!

There was no mistaking the ritual, centuries old, nor ıe cause: La Pina, trudging homewards, a bundle of ewood under one arm, a loaded basket on the other.

The old woman's feet dragged, for she had toiled up om the valley under the April sunshine and her back hed from stooping to pick the dandelion leaves and ıe varied fungi that would form her midday meal. ery poisonous the latter looked, Clodagh thought, as ıe drew nearer. There were bright crimson ones among ıem with white spots like the English toad-stools. But a Pina was wise; she could extract all the deleterious ices, salt and pickle the fungi, too, for use in the lean inter days, when she would soak the strips, dip them olive oil and broil them. She knew all the secrets of ıe soil, herbs to purge and invigorate and roots for asters and soothing balsams. But the hawk-like eyes ere failing her. With the long sight of old age she iled to see on the rocky path, slippery with the heat, mischievous piece of orange peel. Down she went ith a crash on her knees, bundle and basket scattering.

Clodagh hurried to the rescue. She raised La Pina to r feet and questioned her anxiously. The wrinkled ce looked drawn and yellow where the blood had ebbed om under the tan, but the bitter lips were faintly iumphant.

"It is nothing, Signora! The old bones last, and the rth, at least, is kind to old Pina." She mumbled some- ing under her breath disparaging to humanity and ooped for the overturned basket.

But Clodagh forestalled her action.

"I'll see to that! Rest for a moment. You must be eling shaken." She began to pile the fungi back, with inward distaste as her fingers touched them. "They're ll of sand," she warned the old woman.

La Pina watched her curiously.

"The Signora has a good heart." Her voice sounde more grudging than grateful.

When the salad had been recovered too, she held ou her hand for her possessions.

"You'd better let me carry them," Clodagh protested "and lean on my arm. The path's like glass to-day Luckily you're nearly home."

La Pina's black eyes widened. She shook her hea determinedly.

"It would not be well. For the Signora. There ar evil mouths in Siris."

"Who cares?" Clodagh smiled. "*Sono ingles io!*"

"That shows itself." A faint chuckle came from th withered lips. But she gave way, though securing th bundle of twigs as her portion. "*Ebbene!*"

They moved on together, a vivid contrast, which wou have appealed to an artist, of supple youth and fier old age.

On the threshold of her hut, La Pina halted, produce a key from a pocket inside her stuff skirt, unlocked th door and threw it wide. From within came a scutt and whirr of wings as a group of frightened fowls scattered "*Via! Via!*" The old woman drove them ou vigorously through the primitive wash-house behind in the glaring patch of garden; all save one speckled h that remained, brooding, on the bed which filled mo of the vacant space in the room.

Clodagh examined the humble interior. It was cle despite its feathered inmates, who had profited by th owner's absence. It boasted a table and a chair, a pa of bright brass candlesticks of ancient design on t mantelshelf before the picture of a saint; a little sto and an iron pot with the big spoon for mixing polen piles of withies, a stack of baskets and the tools of h trade. Quite unlike the stereotyped abode of a witc

odagh decided, as the old woman shut out the fowls
d returned to claim her possessions.
" May one enter ? "
" If the Signora wishes." La Pina's face was enigmatic.
" It would be nice to rest for a moment," Clodagh
plained and took the chair which her hostess dusted
stily with a turn of her apron. " It's cool here."
La Pina nodded, drew up a stool for herself and sat
wn, quite at ease.
Immediately the speckled hen rose, stretched its yellow
gs, peered sideways cannily and fluttered on to its
ner's lap. It settled down and the thin, brown hands
roked it as if it had been a cat.
Suddenly she broke the silence :
" She has no fear then, *la bella Signora*, of old Pina and
r spells ? " Her black eyes studied Clodagh curiously.
But perhaps she desires that La Pina will lift the veil
the future, or she needs help to win a lover ? "
Clodagh, still puzzled by her use of the dialect, caught
e sense of the last words.
" I have no lover," she said gravely
La Pina's shrunken lips twitched.
" *Hé, hé !* " The laugh cracked. " So young and fair
d no lover ? Then old Pina will give her *two* ! One
er the sea and one at her feet. And the first, he does
t ask but take, and the second, he waits until it is
ven." Her chin sank on her breast ; she was staring
der lowered brows. " And what the first asks is
nied ; the obstinate desire of his heart. It will be
ven to the second. But that is many spans ahead.
nd changes—himself changed. . . .
" The Signora's life is like the steep pathways of Siris.
, down, and rocks to her feet. And, when she is set
climbing, of her own will she will turn back. That
ppens with the new moon. Then many moons on the
el ground, with water and mists "—she shivered
htly—" and a voice that calls and will not be denied.

The voice is a burden she must carry, up to the dar gate. And, beyond it——" She paused and her eye closed. Again there came the discordant chuckle. "*Hé hé!* I see plain now! No longer does she desire to climb She sits in the valley with her lover."

Clodagh listened, incredulous. What could the ol woman mean? Was she really clairvoyante? And i so—— That voice calling? It had conjured up a swif vision of Ian and his impatient habit of standing in th hall and shouting, to avoid the trouble of seeking hi wife: "You there, Clodagh? I *want* you!"

It did not matter what she was doing. He woul persevere until she appeared.

The steep hill? Was that ambition? The valley, he own will—a *lover*? La Pina had made a mistake there She started; a cold shiver ran down her spine, for th old woman was rocking herself on the low stool as on in pain, eyes still closed, face tragic. Broken word escaped her lips:

"Love? *Ohimè*, the love I killed! *Ghito mio*—oh, m heart! Ache, ache— And he never knew. . . . Ma the soul of Cesare for ever burn!" Her anguish swep into sudden anger. She thrust the fowl off her lap an it fled clucking and beating its wings. "May my bod rot if I forgive him! Forgive? Not La Pina—the babbl of priests! Though I pinch and save for Ghito's masse If Cesare lives, may the knife turn in his own hear may his wife betray him, his children starve! *Ohim ohime!* In his youth and strength, *è morto.* And neve to know it was *his*, the babe that stirred under m heart."

Moaning, muttering, she sank into silence.

The speckled hen stole back again, peering, takin hesitant steps. Reassured, it flew on to the bed, scratche the faded counterpane into a nest and subsided, brigh eyes still watching its mistress.

Clodagh, afraid to move, was watching her too, fille

ith awe and pity. So this was the truth of the old andal? A tragic blunder, jealousy; the cruel passions the South. All these years La Pina had suffered. ven maternity denied her. For the child could not ave survived its birth. The thought swept Clodagh ack to her own bitter disappointment. Some wave of lepathy must have passed from her mind to La Pina's, r the old woman raised her head to say, in a voice evoid of emotion, as though her sorrow had run dry: " The Signora is patient with old Pina, for she, too, nows the ache at the breast that comes from the empty adle. But when she is old and bent she will not be t apart from love, but lean on the strong arm of a son. son with his father's brown eyes!"

In the last words there lay a flicker of malice that caped the listener.

" *Brown?*" Clodagh fell into the trap. To herself, e added, " She's wrong there!" with a sense of hugging secret, the inevitable human desire to trip up a careless ophet, however startling his knowledge might be.

" Sissignora." The old, derisive smile appeared on La na's puckered mouth. " Would she have it otherwise? ow goes the saying? 'Blue eyes, wandering eyes; ey for wisdom, black for passion. Green for endless alousy; but brown for the true lover.' The Signora s chosen wisely." She paused for a moment and once ore the veil of sadness fell upon her. " The Signora inks an old woman babbles? It is true! *Ma, che ole?* In fifty years she is the first to cross the door-ep. Save the *parroco*—and he well paid! So the old ngue is loosened, the old sorrow bubbles up." Her es, black as sloes, widened, for Clodagh had risen impul-vely, and was standing beside her, hand outstretched. " It's cruel—unjust! I wish I could help you?" Her dignation found vent.

The wrinkled fingers lay in hers, dry, without response her pressure. Slowly La Pina shook her head.

"Who can help old Pina now? *Sola la morte!* And it comes."

In the pause that followed, through the window there drifted a sound of bells from the distant campanile, solemnly chiming the midday hour.

"*È mezzo-giorno.*" La Pina stirred. "The Signora will not sing this morning, nor he whom they call *il poverello* watch her go from his upper window. The *inglese* with his eyes of brown."

The blood rushed up into Clodagh's face. She let the withered fingers drop and stepped back hastily. So this was what the old creature had hinted, an intrigue between herself and Weir. Had gossip connected her name with his?

"I must go. It's getting late." She ignored the allusion, her head high.

La Pina slowly shrugged her shoulders.

"*Addio,* Signora."

It was not so much the formal word and its note of finality, but the look that followed it which again moved Clodagh. For the old woman's eyes had thanked her, performing the task that her tongue refused.

"Not *addio,*" she said gently. "I shall look in again, if I may?" She paused by the pile of baskets, hesitated, then moved on, fearful of the other's pride. La Pina had plenty of customers. "*A riverderci!*" She nodded, lifting the latch of the door.

"*Addio,*" repeated La Pina.

Clodagh went out into the sunshine.

She stood for a moment, blinking, aware of the overpowering glare, her face turned towards the Torre del Moro.

"It's too late," she decided with an odd sensation of relief.

She chose the longer way home under the shadow of the wall, thinking over the morning's adventure.

"It's my own fault," she told herself. "But I thought

Siris I was safe. It's as gossipy as Keyn Magna. The hole thing's so absurd!" She shrugged her shoulders cornfully. "This eternal question of sex. As if it eally ruled the world? Still, it's settled one point in ıy mind. I mustn't have Ian here. I must wait until move on. But I don't want to leave Siris. Old Edge ays there's always a breeze from the sea, even in August. nd Tiepi's such a splendid master." She turned a orner on the thought and came face to face with the *aestro.*

"My pupil!" He struck an attitude. "Last and est—most beautiful! Has she practised that infernal ill?"

Clodagh burst out laughing. She loved his exaggerated peech. It was so in keeping with his waistcoats.

"She laughs at me!" He threw up his hands. "I ave fallen to this—the friend of Kings! But *davvero*, ontessa, that trill was enough to give a nightingale the ever." Careless of heads that emerged from a doorway eyond them, he cleared his throat and sang in his onderful ghost of a voice a line from some ancient opera hat ended in a delicate trill. "*Così!*" He made her deep bow. "And not like a train that bumps over he sleepers! Thursday for the lesson, then? I go to nch with Signor Wauchope and talk to him of orchestra-on. What a talent! In Siris we have everything. Vork, art and infinite beauty!" He gave her a gallant ance. "Your servant, Contessa," and stood aside for er to pass, drawing in his stout figure and pointing his et, still elegant and encased in bright yellow boots.

"Till Thursday, *caro maestro*!" Wickedly, on the last owel, she extended the note into a trill of the kind he lled "*infernale.*"

Tiepi clapped his hands to his ears. Clodagh, laughing, ipped past him; past the cottage where on the step t a red-haired woman, a struggling child in her arms, moving its single garment in preparation for the wash-

tub. Against the door-post leaned her husband, his shirt opened at the throat showing the fine bronzed neck, in his hands a bowl of macaroni which he scooped up to his mouth with the ease born of long practice. He was as dark as she was fair, with a hint of Saracenic blood.

The pair smiled at Clodagh and nodded, appreciating the little jest she had played at the *maestro's* expense.

"*Buon appetito!*" she cried gaily and they called back a hearty greeting.

She repented her earlier summing-up.

"No, they're not like the villagers at Keyn Magna. It's not the same sort of gossip, a spying to catch you in something evil. I'm young, married, and alone. So they offer me a lover, as they would a flower—to make me happy! It seems to them natural!"

At the next bend in the road she turned. The pair still loitered on the door-step, but the child, naked, its black curls tossing, was skipping unashamed through the dust, its body golden in the sunshine, slender arms above its head, after a swallow-tailed butterfly.

For a moment Clodagh stood and watched the pagan grace of the little figure against the background of ancient wall where rosemary and fern sprouted, and some creeper with a purple flower splashed the stone like spilled wine. Even the shadows seemed filled with colour under the flaming blue of the sky. A lizard crept out of a chink to watch her with bright nervous eyes, and another yellow butterfly, its wings scalloped with chocolate, settled on her roll of music.

The next moment, with a flick of its green tail, the lizard vanished and the butterfly spread its pointed wings. For Clodagh had spoken her thought aloud:

"Oh. I can't leave Siris! It's too lovely."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE delicate tips of the new moon were pointing like the "sign of the horns" to the far-off Pleiades, and between them shone the host of planets; worlds upon worlds, hanging in space, with their endless possibilities of lives before which those on Earth were but the play of the lesser gods, conceived in an idle hour. For who could limit the range of Creation, or the further states awaiting man?

So mused old Horace Edge, face upturned to the heavens, as he lay in his deck-chair on the terrace guarded by his saints.

Venus was in the ascendant to-night. Edge smiled at the fancy that the star of love honoured him. For it was the evening of his birthday, an auspicious one, since he had stepped across the line of three-score and ten.

By a natural train of thought that skirted sex and womanhood as he gazed up at the bright planet, Clodagh slipped into his fancies. He was feeling a little anxious about her. It was through his praise of the island that she had first come to Siris, this lonely and impulsive girl; for a girl she still seemed to Edge, disillusioned by marriage yet curiously virginal at heart. What was to be the end of it, of her cutting adrift from the husband who had tried her beyond endurance?

Since her original confidences she had given him no clue to her projects. She had accepted his advice to do nothing in haste and also the task of freeing Weir from the prison-house of his morbid obsession.

There was no doubt that she had succeeded in this latter enterprise! Edge had learnt—not only from Clodagh—of their nightly expeditions. The *parroco* of Siris Marina, dining with Edge but a few nights since, had referred to the current gossip. For the whole island was looking on with the mixture of shrewdness and tolerance peculiar to the Italian mind. The priest calmly suggested that Edge might use his influence with the pair. He made his meaning unpleasantly plain. His host's careful explanation of "pity for a wounded soldier," and a "friendship based on a love of music," he accepted with a pinch of snuff from his horn box—the action symbolical!

Charity was a Christian virtue, but why not practise it in the daylight? He understood from Luigi that the lady had a husband living. The example was bad for Siris. Of course they did not live in his parish and neither of them belonged to his faith—he betrayed here a tendency to mark the difference between Protestant and Catholic morals—but the Signor Edge, with all respect, was the "head of the English colony."

"Heaven forbid!" His host was aghast. A "colony"! What next?

"A hint—a kindly hint," urged the priest. He produced a dirty, yellow handkerchief and blew his nose like the last trump.

He left the old man jarred and uneasy. Like many another idealist, he was up against the Rock of Custom. He resented his guest's insinuations, but he realized there might be danger in the very friendship he had desired. It would be a pitiful thing if Weir, cured of his melancholy, should succumb to another hopeless attachment.

How brilliantly Venus shone to-night! He could not remove his eyes from the planet. It was a menace in the sky. "'Venus ruling the world,'" he quoted. Where were those two wandering, side by side, through the scented darkness?

A sharp twinge of jealousy startled him as he pictured the pair, absorbed in each other's conversation, drifting through the orange groves, blissfully unaware of time, and those candid eyes of Clodagh's turned to Weir's still handsome profile, eyes filled with hazel light.

La gioventù—three-score and ten! For a moment Edge's philosophy failed him. The futile exasperation of age, fertile in knowledge, susceptible still to the charm of womanhood, yet ruthlessly handicapped by the years, shook him out of his normal calm. He would have given all his wisdom, his work, his money and his faith, to be thirty again and to feel the pulse beating hotly in his throat as he whispered into a woman's ear, her warm shoulder brushing his, the scent of her soft hair about him.

The sudden spasm of envy passed and left him incredibly old and lonely. No more for him was the radiance of Venus but the shadows falling on the harbour; and, beyond, the unknown eternal seas. . . .

Instinctively he lowered his eyes to the narrow channel between his saints. A faint sound broke the silence, the cool and rhythmic beat of oars. Some fisherman returning late from a visit to his lobster-pots, Edge concluded. But, presently, he saw with surprise a shadowy prow round the pier-head where the statue of Hope caught the moonlight. It curved inward, mysteriously seeking the shelter of the narrow harbour.

Edge, puzzled, strained his eyes. Now he could see the rower seated, contrary to local custom, facing a second figure muffled in a white coat. Noiselessly the oars were shipped; the man in the prow leaned forward, drew a vague object on to his knee, and a little thrill ran over the watcher as the deep notes of a guitar woke the echoes of the water. The next moment Edge caught his breath with genuine surprise and pleasure as Clodagh's beautiful voice rang out in the "Sérénade du Passant."

Here were his lawless wanderers!

All his melancholy vanished. It was good to be old when loved and remembered by the young. Sweet, sweet, the golden notes, like those of a thrush in the green wood of England. His eyes filled with happy tears. . . .

The boat slowly drifted nearer. Now he could see Clodagh's face, the full curve of her throat where the duffle coat was thrown wide, and Weir's bent head as his sensitive fingers pressed the frets lovingly and drew forth the resonant chords. They both looked profoundly earnest; like children, thought Edge, on their mettle, engineering a "surprise" and anxious to win the praise of their elders.

He remembered with repugnance the priest's open insinuations. This hunting for sin—where none existed! How the world grudged happiness. The Greeks were wiser. Worshipping beauty—— His thoughts dissolved, for the music had ceased and the warm silence fell again, a hush that he dared not break, until once more the air vibrated with the ripple of swept strings and the magic of "I Pagliacci."

How she sang! He was amazed by the power of her voice, her command of it, and the richness of the deep notes. Had the gods foreseen this, her true vocation and, endlessly wise, sent her a worthless husband; taught her pain that would open the doors of sympathy and understanding, without which all art is void? So Edge philosophized, sinking deeper in his chair, as he gave himself up to the music that followed: old English songs, chosen with care, which revived memories of his youth, those hidden treasures that sound and scent alone can stir from the dust of years.

Dreaming, he lost all count of Time; the scene grew misty before his eyes. He started, like a sleeper awakened when the boat, at last, touched the steps and Clodagh's voice, close to him, reached his ears:

"A happy birthday!"

He rose stiffly to his feet.

"My dear!" So apologetic he looked as he hastened across to receive his guests that she asked with a touch of mischief:

"Are strolling musicians allowed to land—or warned away by your guardian saints? But Charity couldn't be so cruel! She is the one who 'stoops to sinners.'"

"At present," said Edge, recovering, "she kneels to talent! I too." He held out his hands to Clodagh. 'I really don't know how to thank you—you and Wauchope—for this concert. Presently, my wits will return!"

"They don't seem to have gone far!" She stood now on the steps beside him, smiling up into his face; then glanced from him to Weir, still seated in the boat, keeping it close to the parapet.

"You'll find a ring there," said Edge. "Better tie her up, then she can't drift."

"Thanks, but I won't get out. We haven't much time to spare." His voice was abrupt. "It's a long row home."

"Temper!" laughed Clodagh. "A string broke—didn't you hear it?" she asked Edge. "And of course the wind dropped when we started and we couldn't sail. He was so cross!" She gave Weir a teasing smile. 'Come along—just for a minute?"

"Of course! You must both drink my health." Edge was watching the pair, amused. "I didn't know you played the guitar," he added as Weir, unwillingly, secured the boat and rose to his feet.

"Sh! You're on dangerous ground." Clodagh was brimming over with mischief. "The trouble I've had! found it out quite by accident. The guitar, I mean. t was poked away in a corner of the music-room, but challenged him and he had to own up! We couldn't

bring the piano with us. He really plays it very nicely —don't you think so? For an amateur!"

Edge laughed, and she ran on:

"We had a rehearsal in his boat-house the other night and when we came out we discovered an audience, camped round the door, immensely curious! They *are* curious, you know, in Siris." It was said without concern. "Still, it's been great fun. We wanted to give you a surprise."

"You couldn't have planned a happier one. I'm still wordless from admiration. I'd no idea you'd such a voice. It's wonderful, isn't it, Wauchope?"

Weir saw his chance—and took it!

"Wonderful. You should hear her trill. Like a nightingale," he added sweetly.

Clodagh wheeled round.

"Oh, *you*!" She shook her fist at him. "I shall never tell you things again."

Edge found them chairs and excused himself in search of a servant and the wine. As he went off he heard Weir say: "You promised you wouldn't stop," and her reply: "No, I didn't. I said I wouldn't stop long," and smiled to himself, aware of relief. Here was friendship, nothing more. The pair were too natural for love.

He returned to find them arguing over some knotty point in music.

"The *maestro* says——" She broke off and welcomed their host. "Well?" She smiled up at him. "Tell me, how did my voice carry? You can hardly judge across water, but do you think I could fill a big room?"

"Easily, I should say. And one can hear every word —a great charm, to my mind. I've no technical knowledge of music, though it gives me the greatest pleasure still there's no mistaking a gift like yours. You sing" —he threw out his hands with one of his vivid, foreign gestures—"as if you were born to sing!"

Her cheeks grew warm under his praise; her voice was eager when she spoke.

"Then you think it's worth my going on with my studies for a year longer? That's my idea at present. To go to Rome in the autumn and work there under some famous *maestro* in order to profit by his name. By the prestige, I mean, of being his pupil." She paused, for Edge was looking grave.

"Is it settled?" he asked.

"In my own mind." She guessed his intention, remembering her earlier confidences. "Though I shall hate leaving Siris."

"And we shall miss you," Edge responded. "There'll be broken hearts in your wake! Mine, Tiepi's, all the island." He looked up as he spoke, hearing a step on the terrace and received a little shock. Weir's eyes were fixed on Clodagh with an unmistakable expression. Instinctively Edge averted his own. "But we can't expect to keep you for ever. When you're a famous *prima donna*"—he tried to make his voice light—"you must return for a rest cure. And find us all waiting for you. But don't be too long, my dear. I'm seventy to-day."

"You're not!" Clodagh's eyes widened. "I can't believe it. You're joking?"

"No. Three-score and ten, the allotted span! But healthy." He smiled at her and beckoned to the waiting servant: "You can put it down. We'll help ourselves."

"What a feast!" Clodagh glanced at the tray with its sandwiches, cakes and fruit. She challenged her fellow-guest. "*Now*, aren't you glad I made you stay? You won't get me to stir for an hour! I'm going to enjoy the birthday party. Couldn't we leave the boat here and walk home? It would be quicker."

"Of course," said Edge. "I'll have out the cart and you can be driven back. The donkeys need exercise."

"How lovely!" She clapped her hands. "But isn't it too late for them?"

"I don't ask their opinion." He smiled, "Although the leader's name is Balass!"

He started to pour out the wine.

"*Ecco!*" Clodagh raised her glass and stood up. "To our dear host—and his seventy summers! I see it all plainly now. In Siris there are no winters, so you're really 35! May I be as young when I reach your age."

"I too," echoed Weir.

They clinked glasses, in a silence that held affection and regret, the knowledge of a coming parting.

"You'll be younger still," said Edge as he thanked her and nodded to Weir. "That is, if you're wise."

"The powder in the jam," laughed Clodagh. "I don't want to be wise; I want to be happy. Famous!" Her eyes shone.

"It's a tall order," Weir suggested. "Both fame and happiness. They don't always run together."

"They should, if fame means freedom. Freedom's the biggest prize of all."

"And what will you do with it?" asked Edge. As she did not answer, he proceeded, "I'll tell you. You'll forge fresh chains for yourself."

"What sort of chains?" She was curious.

"Chains of habit—the most binding. If I dared prophesy, I should say in your case it means work—or love." With his fine instincts, Edge was aware of tension in the man beside him and of Clodagh's serene unconcern. He thought: "Yes, he's fond of her, but she doesn't guess, thank Heaven! He's not the man to let her guess."

Clodagh, meanwhile, took up the challenge.

"Work perhaps, but work's not a chain. It's a path, leading to the heights." Suddenly she remembered La Pina. Would she "turn back," of her own accord? Never! "As to love," she continued, "I've got past the

silly age. All I ask for now is friendship. Loyal friends, like you two." A warmer note crept into her voice. "I shall never have truer ones. I'm grateful—please believe that? I shan't forget you, either of you, when I have to leave Siris. I shall come back——" She broke off, seized by an impulsive notion, rose to her feet and solemnly sprinkled some drops of the golden wine on the stones of the terrace. "A libation to the gods! Of Ancient Greece or Cro-Magna, whichever Mr. Edge prefers. Listen now! I swear by it—I, Clodagh Strangway—to return and drink wine with my friends again, if they'll wait for me and remember me." She held out a hand to each.

"There's little doubt of that," said Edge, pressing her slender fingers. "If I'm in the flesh, you'll find me waiting. And I think I can speak for Wauchope too. But make no rash vows, my dear. The wine of life lies before you. The wine of Siris is thin beside it."

Clodagh, more moved than she cared to show, settled herself again in her chair, conscious still of Edge's handclasp and of Weir's fingers, cold as ice. How could he be chilly on such a night?

"It's a compact. I shall keep it. With grey curls and a wreath of laurels perched crookedly on top! I shall expect a floral arch, and Tiepi in his most gorgeous waistcoat declaiming in triumph: 'I taught her to trill!' So now you can picture my return."

"And where do I come in?" asked Weir. "I made you sing before Tiepi."

"But you shook me for stealing your tomatoes."

"That did it—the shock! One of those cases of arrested faculties. I don't suppose you'd been shaken before, had you?"

"Not recently," Clodagh admitted.

"Still, it was I who brought you to Siris," said old Edge possessively.

"You see?" She laughed up at Weir. "You're out of it altogether!"

"The humble accompanist, in fact?"

"Humble!" She raised her glass again. "I drink to the Great Opera. Will you give me a leading part?"

"With a *trillo infernale*?"

They laughed happily together and she explained the joke to their host.

The conversation drifted to the festival in the coming week when the Rosary would be shown in the church after the long procession starting from the Sacred Grotto.

"I shall come and fetch you," Edge told Clodagh. "You can't be in that rabble alone. But it's really a pretty sight, the little children scattering flowers and every one in gala dress. It would make a good picture. That reminds me! I had a birthday present to-night, sent up from the boat. A water-colour sketch of a stream that runs past my old home. It was painted for me by a friend four years older than myself. Imagine that! A fine study too. Would you like to see it?" he asked Clodagh. As she agreed, he rose to his feet. "I'm afraid this light is not good enough. We had better go indoors." He glanced at Weir, who excused himself lazily, fully aware that his host was manœuvring for a word alone with Clodagh.

They passed into the library. Edge placed the picture before her.

"It's clever, isn't it? That haze and the tranquil flow of the water. Doesn't it make you long for England?"

"No." Her lips closed firmly. "All that lies behind me, that grey life. I need sunshine. Siris has taught me this." She caught his inquiring eyes. "Though it means hard work too, loneliness and self-denial, everything sacrificed to my voice. But it's worth it—just to be oneself!"

She read a fleeting regret on his face.

"Then you haven't taken my advice?"

"To wait for a sign? But I did! It came." She told him of Aunt Addy's death and legacy, all the time conscious of a subtle evasion. "You see?"

"I hear," Edge substituted. He was going to add more when the clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven.

"Is that the time? We must fly!" said Clodagh. "Or Luigi will scold me. He does sometimes, when we're extra late."

A warning rose to Edge's lips, but he swallowed it back. Afterwards he was thankful that he had not spoken. Instead he murmured:

"You'd like me to see about the cart?" and went out to give the order.

Clodagh stood for a moment, staring down at the English sketch, with the queer sense of having fallen in her old friend's estimation.

"Of course he's old-fashioned," she thought. "He would like me to return to my husband."

She wandered back to the terrace; to Weir, sunk deep in his chair, legs stretched out, eyes half-closed.

"You asleep?"

"Nearly!" He stirred and smiled. "The wine of Siris may be thin, but it's potent if you take enough." The flippancy died out of his voice. "You're tired?"

"Not a bit!" She added lightly, "The cart will be round in a minute. We mustn't forget your guitar. It's been a success—don't you think so? The old dear has enjoyed it."

"And has been worrying you," thought Weir, aware of a shadow on her face.

But nothing could have rung more true than their host's gentle thanks as he saw them off at the gate. As the tandem of donkeys breasted the hill, they could see him still standing there, erect despite his seventy years, to give them a parting wave.

The pair in the cart relapsed into silence. Once Weir

leaned forward and captured an end of the scarf that Clodagh had wound round her throat and with which the breeze was playing tricks. She took it from him absently and tucked it inside her coat. He tried in vain to gauge her thoughts. Only when they reached the *vico* did he venture an interruption:

"There's Luigi!" He pointed to the landlord, apparently watching for them in the porch.

As he helped Clodagh down, he heard behind him hurrying steps that descended the slope.

"Signora!" Luigi spoke breathlessly. "Zere are two telegrammas for her! Zey come soon after she has gone. Pietro, he bring zem off ze boat but I know notta where to seek her."

Clodagh, startled, took them from him. In Siris a telegram was an event, a rare symbol of disaster. She stifled her sudden dread. They were probably from the lawyers.

She opened the first and skimmed the contents:

"No reply Ian asking for you condition most dangerous come at once."

She stood there stunned, staring at it, all the colour drained from her face.

"I don't understand!" Her voice shook.

"Open the other," urged Weir. "It may explain."

She obeyed him, straining to read the typed strips, aware of the shadow of Luigi who had moved between her and the moonlight. Weir saw this and pushed him back. At last she deciphered the message which was dated four days earlier:

"Serious accident to Ian please return without delay."

Both telegrams were signed formally by her mother-in-law.

To the men watching her, it seemed an eternity before she raised her strained face.

"It's my husband," she said. "An accident. I must go home. They're expecting me. But *how*?" Her unnatural calm broke. "There's no boat, and—he's dying!"

"Steady!" Weir had gripped her arms, for she was swaying on her feet. "It's perfectly easy. There's the yacht. Edge will take you to Salerno. But, first, we must talk things over." He turned his head to the waiting groom, standing by the patient donkeys. "I shall want you. Don't go. I'm coming back in the cart." Then, gently, he slipped an arm through Clodagh's and motioned Luigi to be silent. "We'll go up to your room, discuss trains, and then you must pack."

"Yes." She caught at the thought of action.

Luigi, in their wake, shrugged his shoulders and muttered. Not a word of sympathy and the Signora in such trouble! Who could understand the English? And people said he was her lover!

But Weir was wiser than Luigi; he knew the pride of the woman beside him. By the time they reached the top of the stairs, Clodagh had herself in hand.

"I ought to have heard six days ago," she told Weir. "That's what's so awful. The time that's wasted! I might have arrived. And now——" She dared not voice the thought.

"What was the date of the latest?" he asked.

She turned on the threshold of her room and handed the telegrams to him. He examined them, inwardly wild at the terse and peremptory wording, with no attempt to soften the shock.

"The fifteenth, three days later than the first, and now we're at the twentieth? I think you may safely conclude that your husband is no worse, or they would have wired again. You'd have had it by this boat."

"That's true." Dry-eyed, she stared at him. "What train can I catch?"

"I don't know yet. Edge will tell me. I must go and consult him. But you'd better be ready. Do you think you feel up to packing?"

"Quite. I'd sooner have something to do."

"You would." Into his brown eyes came a look of infinite understanding. "You'd always be brave. But take your time. I shall be back within the hour."

"It's so good of you." She tried to smile. "And Mr. Edge. I really feel——"

"Then don't. You know you can count on us, that we're only——" He stammered, held out his hand and gripped hers, harder than he guessed. "I wish we could have spared you this!" He was off, but on the threshold he paused. "I expect you'd rather be alone? . . . All right. I'll see to that."

"You think of everything," she murmured.

She heard his steps die away, then his voice in the hall below; later the short trot of the donkeys as the cart rolled down the hill. She went slowly to her bedroom, locked herself in and turned up the lamp. The whole episode seemed unreal, this immense frustration of her plans.

Ian, dangerously ill, shattered by some accident at the height of his strength and headstrong purpose, his love of life, and his passion for Margot?

"I mustn't think." She found her keys, unlocked her trunk and removed the tray with its folded store of tissue paper.

Edge's words came back to her A "sign"? And La Pina's prophecy. Of her "own will." But was it her will or some grim, inexorable fate? Her heart felt dead within her, as she sank on her knees before the trunk. This unending bond of marriage! She reached forward for her shoes in their neat row against the wall and, suddenly, a memory stung her, like an arrow from the past; Ian's voice, vibrant with health:

"Put on strong boots, old lady. It's been raining all the night."

She thrust them into the hard corners and found the tears blinding her eyes. Broken words came from her lips:

"If only I get back in time! 'Asking' for me? Oh, Ian, Ian. . . ."

CHAPTER XXV

THE endless journey was over and Clodagh found herself involved in the bustle and noise of Bristol Station, her nerves strained to breaking point.

She had wired from Dover for the car when she came off the night boat, and now a sudden panic shook her. She would know directly she saw the chauffeur; for the man was devoted to his master. As she followed in the wake of the porter her sight was blurred and her limbs felt leaden. But a sharp gust of wind met her, driving up the station yard, boisterous, full of gritty dust; she clutched her hat and with the action the paralysis passed, her vision clearing.

There was the Rolls-Royce, Stubbs calm and alert beside it.

He sprang forward, touching his cap, saw her dumb distress and relieved it with his first words. Sir Ian was better, had turned the corner the day before.

"The crisis, m'lady, of the pneumonia," he explained with an obvious pride in his mastery of the medical terms. "The doctor thinks he'll do now."

"Pneumonia?" Clodagh found her voice. "But the telegram said an accident?"

"So it were, m'lady, at the start." Stubbs opened the door of the car. Mechanically, she got in. "Sir Ian fell over the edge of the quarry where them railings was blown away in the gale last October, broke 'is leg and put out his shoulder. It was a rough night, raining 'ard, and he wasn't found until the morning. By that

time——" His speech was checked through the action of the porter impatiently hoisting the heavy trunk. "Steady there! Excuse me, m'lady?" He was off to safeguard his precious varnish.

But Clodagh could guess the rest of the story; the long hours of exposure, with Ian helpless and in pain. It explained the second telegram, when pneumonia had set in. A little shudder ran over her as she pictured him lying there in the "danger spot" foreseen by his father and which with his own obstinate scorn he had refused to consider. She could hear again his answer to Margot anent this trysting-place for lovers:

"Well, they can look after themselves! Those damned rails spoilt the view."

For the first time it occurred to her that the Heriots had sent her no message of enlightenment or sympathy. As Stubbs returned to her side, she asked him:

"Who is at the Manor now?"

"Only her ladyship and the nurses. Thank you, m'lady." He paid the porter and dismissed him.

"Mrs. Heriot and Mrs. Archdale have left?"

"Yes, m'lady. On the morning Peters found Sir Ian." As his mistress asked no further question, he threw out a respectful hint, "We have to call for the fish, m'lady. I gave them the order on my way."

Clodagh nodded and leaned back, buttoning her coat under her chin, for the east wind was cold and searching. Stubbs, relieved, started the engine.

She was conscious of this relief and of the change in the servant's voice when he had spoken of the Heriots. What did it cover? Some scene between her mother-in-law and her guests? Or was there gossip afloat in the village?

Anyhow, they had gone. The tension of body and mind relaxed as the beautifully swung car carried her away from the station. After the grinding jolt of trains it was like sinking into bed. For two nights she had

not slept and now the reaction was setting in. In a dream she watched Stubbs claim the fish-mat at the busy shop and turn the car's head homewards; saw city streets open out, with a passing glimpse of masts and funnels as they crossed the bridge by the docks, and the last thing she realized was tram bells ringing in her ears and the chime of the cathedral clock.

She slept; unaware of the look of compassion on Stubbs's face as he descended before the door of the Clifton chemist to pick up a bottle of medicine and saw the dark lashes lying on her white cheeks and her air of exhaustion. His loyalty to his master had been sorely tried in the past months. A good thing "that red-haired——" had departed! He did not mince the expression. Thank God, the master had pulled through. A bad business altogether. He drove on carefully, minimizing the use of the horn.

Clodagh awoke—to the open country—still drowsy but refreshed. Bewildered, she saw the hedges sprouting and a delicate flurry of young leaves with bare boughs lacing them; primroses, hiding under the banks; in the woods, frail anemones, like snow-flakes left behind by winter. For a moment she could not understand the amazing change in the season. Had Father Time stayed his hand, the summer of Siris been a dream?

No, this was England, with blue-grey skies across which the rain-clouds scudded; with lush fields where cows stood, knee-deep in grass, their calves beside them, and lambs, long-tailed and absurd, leaped over the moist tussocks or the levels studded with celandines. England—Ian! Her wits returned. She was recaptured by that beauty which seems to hold a note of reserve, of calm unknown in the South. Old Edge had been right after all, she thought, as the car slackened speed to pass through the gates, wide open, of the West Lodge. She waved her hand to the old woman, in the doorway where the rose was sprouting, and saw her apron

float out as she curtsied painfully, for her knees were creaking with rheumatism, and the look of interest on her face, seamed and withered under the net that bound her scanty, white hair. "Her young ladyship" had returned. Time too, was the afterthought! But the old habit of repression, the key-note of the English peasant, intensely proud and secretive in its dealings with the gentry, allowed no hint of this to appear. Her smile was perfect; respectful, blank. Shading her faded eyes with her hand, she watched the car enter the arch of ancient trees with their lichened trunks.

To Clodagh came the memory of her home-coming as a bride; her passionate consciousness of the man who sat beside her, the nervous thrill of ownership, and her youthful dreams of their future together. Then the chill of her mother-in-law's reception; the fine old house mutely resentful, impaired by the signs of wealth without taste, and Ian's fear of his parent. . . .

She was there, waiting for Clodagh again. But this time she felt no dread. Her whole outlook on life had altered. Was it through the spell of Siris, the island where grass gave place to rocks, with its goats and mules in the burning sunshine, and the warm nights when she wandered with Weir through the scented orange groves? She could find no answer to the riddle of the change in herself. But of one thing she was certain: she would never be a prisoner again. She had returned of her own will, but nothing could hold her. Not even Ian. In Siris she had found her wings. For the first time in her married life, when the car drew up at the pillared porch, she crossed the threshold, her own mistress.

There was no sign of her mother-in-law, but as she returned the butler's greeting she caught a glimpse of a white cap that was thrust over the gallery rails. It belonged, however, to the nurse and Clodagh went up the staircase to meet her.

"Lady Strangway?" The nurse, hard-faced, inquisitive, advanced somewhat aggressively. "Sir Ian has been expecting you. But only five minutes, please. He can't stand any excitement." Mentally, she was totting up this absent wife who returned so late. "Cold as a fish," was her estimate.

"I quite understand." Clodagh nodded, without smiling. She had taken an instinctive dislike to the speaker, comparing her unfavourably with the kind and capable woman who had nursed her through her long illness. "Where is he?"

"In here." The white-capped head was jerked casually to the door behind her.

Clodagh passed her and turned the handle. She saw before her the same warm light pouring in from the south windows on to the painted furniture, but the narrow beds had been removed to make place for a larger one.

In it lay a still figure, the massive shoulders sunk in the pillows. The eyes were closed, the face looked sunken and this emphasized the obstinate chin; but the mouth was slack with suffering, the once crisp hair dank and lifeless.

She stole to the bed-side and stood there looking down at her husband, on the wreck of his splendid manhood. She caught her breath as his eyelids quivered, slowly lifted, and, once again, she met that vividly blue gaze.

"Clodagh!" His voice was a thread of sound. "At last!" The bleached hand on the sheet moved helplessly.

In a moment, without hesitation, her own warm one covered it. Shocked, she saw a tear well up in the eyes that searched hers, overflow and trickle down to the stubble on his jaw where the unshaved hair gleamed like gold. Pity caught her, strangling her. She sank on her knees, bending forward, her face pressed against his.

"It's all right—you'll be better soon. Poor old boy! You must cheer up. We're going to get you *quite* well." She was soothing him like a mother, trying to pass on her own strength.

She felt him turn his head, conscious herself of the effort it caused him.

"Kiss me," he whispered, his breath laboured.

Her fresh lips met his, cracked by fever, and felt his response. But even in that tense moment, when pity earned what pride forbade, she could analyse her emotions. His touch could no longer stir her blood. She had kissed him as she would kiss a child, crying, afraid in the dark.

* * * * *

In the hall she found Lady Strangway giving an order to the chauffeur:

"At six o'clock. I'll be ready then." She heard Clodagh's step and turned slowly. "Oh, there you are! Have you seen Ian?"

Her face was more pinched and rat-like than ever; she limped as she moved forward. If Ian was changed, so was his mother. Every line of her spare body breathed to Clodagh of sleepless endurance, of her battle with death on behalf of her son. But where was the triumph of victory? Though her head was high, there was no light in the clouded, vindictive eyes.

Clodagh held out a hand to her as she reached the level of the hall.

"Yes, I've seen him." Her voice was grave. "He stood it well and he's now asleep. So I came away. But I can tell how ill he's been. You must have had a dreadful time."

"We had. You were spared that." Lady Strangway smiled grimly. Her chilly fingers let Clodagh's fall. "Sleeping? That's good. It's been one of the troubles. He kept on asking for you."

Clodagh flinched. She opened the door of the drawing-room.

"Come in here. I want to explain." She waited for the old lady to pass and closed it silently after her, mindful of the sick man above. "Your telegrams didn't reach me until nearly midnight on Tuesday. By five o'clock next morning I was on the water. I caught the early train from Naples, then the *rapide* at Rome and travelled direct. There's only a steamer once a week that brings the mails, and no cable at Siris. Aunt Helen knew that. I explained it by letter when I didn't wire on Aunt Addy's death. She could have told you."

From Lady Strangway came an odd sound, mid-way between a snort and a laugh.

"She hadn't a chance. I didn't see her. The pair cleared out whilst I was with Ian. Time too!" The last words escaped her involuntarily. Her mouth closed on them, tight as a trap.

Clodagh's own eyes narrowed.

"Then you understand that I couldn't help it? I started as soon as I knew."

Lady Strangway peered at her, and nodded. Her gaze shifted to the window and was fixed on the dark line of arbutus, against which the first daffodils bent sideways before the wind. She appeared to be thinking profoundly. At last she turned and faced Clodagh.

"It's no good. I can't forgive you." She seemed to have come to some decision. "You never ought to have gone away. You're not a fool—I warned you myself—you *knew* what was going on. I don't believe you were ever ill. Not seriously. It was an excuse. You ran away and left my son—deliberately—with that woman." All her pent-up misery and anger poured out in a flood, filling Clodagh with amazement. "You couldn't hold him yourself; you couldn't even give him a child. You weren't the right wife for him. Then, at the first temptation, you up with your heels and run!

A cough! What's a cough to a mistress? She was hat, and it's been *your* doing. You knew what he vas, a thorough Strangway—haven't I gone through it ll with his father in our early days? But I cured *im.* And I kept him under. Like *that*——" Her humb came down forcibly on the table beside her, the ail blanching. "It's the only way with men! In he end he respected me; I couldn't have wished for better husband. Ian too. I taught him obedience. Then you came, with your London airs, and under-nined my influence. And now"—she was choking—there he lies! Crippled—all the village talking."

She groped behind her for a chair, her bodily strength ailing her, but her spirit unquenchable.

In that pregnant moment, Clodagh stood wondering t her own calm. No more could this hard, old woman nove her than the son whose splendid physique had been once her pride and her secret fear. She had the urious sensation of looking on, an outsider, in this ast battle forced on her. She took up the challenge esolutely:

"You're perfectly right. I was not ill. But I didn't un away through weakness. I went because I knew Ian. No words of mine could have stopped him once he'd aken the bit between his teeth. You should know that oo, being his mother. But——"

Lady Strangway caught her up.

"Why didn't you turn your cousin out? You were nistress here."

"Because," said Clodagh, "Ian would have followed er. There was only one chance, and I took it. That vas the line of least resistance. To give him a free and to learn what Margot really is: a woman who reys on the passions of men for what she can get out f them, and gives nothing in return!" Her lip curled. Nothing worth having, after the first glamour has assed. But you're wrong on one point." Her voice

hardened. "I *was* 'a fool.' I trusted them. I didn't understand your warning. Not then, though I've often thought of it since. I believed that Margot had improved. I was blind to her schemes to catch Ian. By the time I knew, it was too late." For the first time anger quickened her speech. "Do you think it was *easy*, loving him? That it cost me nothing to go away and leave her here in possession?"

Lady Strangway did not answer. She was staring at Clodagh, her beady eyes meeting the other's unflinching glance. A silent duel. But Clodagh won. She saw her old enemy's lids tremble, her gaze shift to the window. She continued, driving the facts home as though the words were actual blows:

"I went away, knowing he'd miss me. Not my love, but my daily service. And he *did*. I read it in his letters. Could Margot act as his secretary, be ready each time he shouted for her, tramp through the rain, ride by his shoulder? Be the shadow in fact of his desires, the wife he had trained for his own comfort? No! That was my only hold when his passion for me had burnt itself out."

"And yours for him," the old woman retorted.

"Mine was love. And I proved it," said Clodagh.

Silence followed.

It was broken at last by a strangled sob. Lady Strangway's hands went up to cover her convulsed face and the tears, that even her will could not check, came pouring down her wrinkled skin from the eyes that had scorned to weep for many a bitter day.

"Why didn't you come to me?" she wailed. "I could have told you. I know Ian. A firm hand. That's all he needed! Why didn't you come to his *mother*?"

"Because"—Clodagh clung to the truth—"you have always been my enemy. From the first day I entered this house. I'm sorry, but it's no use pretending. I couldn't. I have my own pride."

"And you've broken mine." It was a whisper. "My son! Living here with his mistress—in the home my husband made for me."

Unconsciously she had found the weapon that could pierce Clodagh's armour. At the ring of despair in the words, her young heart seemed to contract. She could not bear the sight of her foe, so old and crushed, admitting defeat. Impulsively she moved forward and knelt down by the quivering figure.

"I'm sorry."

The thin old voice came up from the bowed head: "Men, men! We slave for them, bear them sons, and they break our hearts. Either the husband or the child. I thought Ian would repay me for all I suffered—years ago! You're not the only woman to learn that the strongest men have their weaknesses. A pretty face—and we're forgotten! But I conquered him. I won through." As though the memory revived her, she straightened herself, her tears vanquished. For a long moment she looked at Clodagh. "You've more courage than I thought." She spoke abruptly. "I blame you still. You've encouraged sin. But I misjudged you. I believe you did what you *thought* was best."

"Thank you." Clodagh was aware of how much the admission had cost the strong-willed old creature. It touched her generosity. Her arms went round the bony shoulders that felt brittle to her touch, and she raised her cheek, to feel dry lips brush it with the faintest pressure. A furtive caress, but sincere.

Her response amazed her mother-in-law. For the first time in long years warm young arms tightened round her and Clodagh kissed her on both cheeks.

"But you did very wrong," said Lady Strangway, clinging to her last support, as her daughter-in-law rose to her feet.

"Well, it's too late now to look back. What we've got to do is to mend Ian."

Lady Strangway's face changed.

"That's your task. You're his wife. I've ordered the brougham round at six."

She had resumed her old manner, but Clodagh smiled, unimpressed. She crossed the room and rang the bell.

The butler appeared, so promptly that he must have been close at hand; a fact his mistress realized. The whole house seemed involved in suspense and some furtive mystery.

"That you, Craddock?" She turned her head, and spoke with a cold air of command. "Just telephone to the stables and say the carriage will not be wanted. And bring tea. It's past the hour."

"Yes, m'lady." He sidled out.

Clodagh glanced at Lady Strangway. She was sitting bolt upright, her cap straightened, hands folded, an aloof expression on her face.

Emboldened by her silence, Clodagh explained, with outward calm:

"I shall want you to help me with Ian." She had a brilliant inspiration. "I shall never manage that nurse alone!"

The ghost of a smile rewarded her

"You leave her to me," said her ladyship.

CHAPTER XXVI

BUT there was no need for intervention. The doctor himself approved of Clodagh's presence in the sick-room. She was necessary to the patient's welfare; he could not bear her out of his sight. When she was absent for long, he fretted, was restless and missed his sleep. Even the nurse, intensely jealous of her rights, admitted grudgingly that "the young Lady Strangway" had "sense." She did not allow Ian to talk, but would sit by his bed reading to him from the immortal pages of *Jorrocks*.

Her beautiful voice was a factor in his slow recovery. She could play on it like an instrument, insensibly lulling him to sleep. Sometimes she sang to him from the drawing-room below, the windows wide open. Ian determinedly chose the music. "Something cheery," as he expressed it; airs from comic opera and recent revues which she bought for him with a helpless feeling of amusement. A vision of Tiepi would rise before her, outraged, upbraiding his pupil. Practice, of course, was out of the question. She often thought of La Pina's words; of those heights, prohibited. But on the whole she was happy. She wondered if this was what Edge had meant by "the peace of renunciation." What she failed to realize was that Ian—through his weakness and need of her—had aroused that dormant maternal love which she would have given to her children. Pity may awaken passion, but the passion that sinks to pity is poor basis for married life when youth still riots in

the blood. She shut her eyes to the danger ahead when, the duties of nursing at an end, Ian would demand a wife.

His recovery was slow. The man was not only crippled in body but haunted by a growing remorse, the bitter aftermath of folly. Lying there, in the long hours, he wondered how much of the scandal was known to his mother and the village. Would it reach Clodagh's ears? His passion for Margot had turned to ashes; the cure had, in truth, been drastic. He was thankful that his wife avoided all mention of the accident.

But Clodagh now held the missing links in the story of that fateful night. Peters had enlightened her, on her first visit to the stables. He had let out more than he intended, voluble through nervousness, under her skilful questioning.

She had chosen the old groom for the purpose, knowing his attachment to Ian. He would not talk outside his domain or repeat their conversation. It was Peters, too, who had found Ian, broken, at the foot of the quarry. This much she knew from Stubbs. She listened, incredulous, as they stood in the grey light of the stables where only the movements of the horses and the slow munch of the pony feeding in the loose-box near them broke the silence, save for the twitter of a martin, an unwilling prisoner. She watched the bird in its futile darting under the high, whitewashed roof as the groom, long-winded, got into his stride.

It had been a hot day, he told her, after a week of rain, and in the evening a thick white mist had risen from the heated earth to pour upward from the valley, enveloping the Manor and grounds. Peters had returned to the stables after his supper, to have a last look at Sand Boy, a favourite hunter of Sir Ian's, who had been suffering from a cough.

He had chosen the upper road and had passed his master and Mrs. Archdale standing near the famous

view, their figures blurred in the mist but their voices unmistakable.

Peters here made an excuse which confirmed Clodagh's later opinion :

" Sir Ian was speaking loudly, though if Stubbs says they was quarrelling, 'e didn't 'ave it from *me*, m'lady."

It was late by the time he left the stables, still anxious about the horse. The mist meanwhile had thickened, and he took the lower path home.

" For you couldn't 'ardly see yer 'and before you, m'lady," he explained. " I felt me way along the railings until I come to the knot o' trees just below the rock-garden. Strange enough, it was clearer there and I sees some one running. A woman it were. She turned in at the gate. I'd got it into my 'ead it was Mary, so I calls out, ' Good night,' but she didn't answer. So then I guessed it were Mrs. h'Archdale and I 'oped the master was about, as it meant the vet next day, to my mind, and I thought, p'r'aps, he'd 'ave a look at Sand Boy 'imself. But I never met 'im ; so I went 'ome and turned in. I was round early in the morning, for the 'orse was on me mind. 'Owsomedever, 'e were better. Then the telephone went and I 'eard Craddock, very upset-like. Was Sir Ian at the stables ? Seems that when they went to call 'im, they found 'is bed untouched and no one knew where 'e'd gone to. An' Craddock, the old fool—beggin' yer pardon, m'lady—ad locked up the night before, 'earing Mrs. h'Archdale come in and thinking the master was with 'er. So then, m'lady, it flashed across me where I'd last seen Sir Ian, standin' with 'is back to the drop. Jim turns up at that moment and I took 'im with me to search the quarry. An' there we found 'im ! " The man's face worked. ' I'll never forget it. I thought 'e were gone ! So we fetched a 'urdle and carried him up, and Stubbs went off for the doctor. I 'ung about till 'e come. I ain't never thought much o' Stubbs "—he scratched his ear

reflectively, for it was an old rivalry, that of machinery versus horseflesh—" but there ! 'e sat down and blubbed like a child when 'e 'eard the master weren't dead. Then we fetched 'er old ladyship, and Stubbs went off to Bristol Station with Mrs. 'eriot and 'er daughter, and brought back a pair o' nurses. An' that's about all, I think, m'lady."

All ? Enough, Clodagh decided, as she made her way up to the house. She could guess the verdict of the village : a serious quarrel between the lovers, ending in the " accident." Margot, hysterical, searching for Ian, finding him dead—as she supposed—and, seized with a sudden panic, anxious to cover all trace of her presence ; Margot, trembling in her room, too terrified to give the alarm, thinking only of herself, and seeking her mother in the dawn to pour out the whole story ; the hurried packing and departure.

The village would say she had pushed him over Clodagh could hardly credit this. Had pushed him away, more likely, in the mist that disguised the danger, or Ian might have stepped back, forgetting that the railing was gone.

A third hypothesis she dismissed. That Margot might have left him as the result of their quarrel before the accident occurred. But, if so, what was she doing in the mist on the lower level ?

In the letter from Aunt Helen, awaiting Clodagh on her arrival, had been a phrase that confirmed her suspicions. It followed close upon expressions of sympathy and condolence and an explanation of their departure :

" I felt we were better out of the way, more room for the nurses. And there was nothing we could *do*. I do trust all will go well and that dear Ian may be better by the time you reach home. It was a *dreadful* shock ! When I think, too, that it might have been Margot ! For she started for a stroll with him, then turned back on account of the damp, when he wanted to go beyond

the garden. Even then she was quite chilled and glad to get warm by my fire."

With Peter's words in her ears, Clodagh re-read the last line. There were plenty of fires in the house. Why disturb Aunt Helen, who had evidently gone to bed? To establish an alibi, a witness to her early return? Clodagh would never know the truth, for Ian's lips would be sealed.

"And I don't want him to tell me," she thought. "Or to guess why I went away. I've forgiven him, but I couldn't bear to have it all raked up again. Besides you can't hit a man when he's down!"

It was strange that forgiveness should be so simple. Just the sight of the strong man crying, his helplessness and escape from death, had wrung from her a silent pardon.

Too simple. She did not see this, though, at times, it puzzled her. Had she exaggerated a passing infidelity? No, she had unconsciously thrown jealousy overboard together with the possessive instinct. The fact was she had ceased to love him. He was just a man who had sinned and been punished, and had turned to her for consolation; less than this, a wilful child, to be scolded and nursed back to health.

Meanwhile, there was plenty to do to set the child on its legs again. Her task left her little leisure for thought concerning the past or the future.

But once, as she came in from the garden, with some fresh flowers for his room, and heard him calling through the window: "Clodagh! That you? I *want* you, Clodagh!" she remembered La Pina's words anent "the burden of a voice," and felt the old touch of rebellion.

It passed as swiftly as it had come. She ran up the stairs and entered his room.

"Tulips! Aren't they fine fellows?"

She held them out for him to admire. But Ian only frowned at her.

"Where have you been?" He was querulous. "Nurse

will arrange those. Give them to her, and sit down. It's so darned dull being penned up here. I thought you were never coming."

"Poor old boy!" She pulled off her hat and secured a flying lock.

He watched her.

"You've lovely hair. You're prettier than you used to be."

"Am I?" She laughed and sat down beside him. "Shall I read to you?"

"No, I want to talk." He picked a loose leaf off her sleeve, his eyes on the white curve of her throat. "Why don't you wear your pearls now?"

"I've never got them out," said Clodagh.

"Out? Do you mean you haven't unpacked them?"

"No." She was suddenly nervous, but she managed to speak carelessly. "They're in the safe. I didn't take them abroad with me."

"Why not?"

"Well, they might have been stolen."

"But they ought to be worn. They'll turn yellow. Get them out. I'd like to see them."

"Another time. I must find the key." She picked up *Jorrocks*. "I'll read to you. It's nearly the hour for your broth."

"No, get your keys." He was obstinate.

She saw it was wiser to humour him.

The safe was built into the wall not far from his bed. His eyes followed all her movements. As she swung it open, she heard his voice:

"Why, isn't that your *jewel-case*? On the upper shelf."

"Yes, the pearls are inside it. I took very little to Italy."

"Bring it here. We'll go through it. Something to do." He spoke eagerly.

She was cornered. She had left all his gifts behind purposely, in her flight to Siris.

"It will tire you."

"Nonsense!"

She gave way and carried the handsome case, in crocodile skin, with her initials, to the table by his bed, found the gold key and unlocked it.

Ian himself opened it, and the upper trays slid out on their hinges, filled with minor jewellery.

"Even your rings," he said slowly.

He chose one, holding a pigeon-blood ruby set round with diamonds, lifted her hand, and slipped it on, above the thick wedding band. In silence she watched him, wondering.

"Do you remember when I gave you that? On the first anniversary of our marriage. You were ill——" He stopped.

Clodagh nodded.

"I was generally ill in those days."

"But you aren't now. *I'm* the crock!" He straightened the ring on her finger. "Does it make any difference?"

She was perplexed.

"In what way?"

"Well, I've thought—I've imagined lately, since you returned from Siris——" The words he sought would not come. He drew her hand closer to him. His blue eyes studied her face. "Do you love me?" he asked under his breath.

"Of course I do." Her voice was soothing, her cool fingers steady in his.

"You don't!" His impatient gesture caught the edge of the jewel-case.

Clodagh clutched it and narrowly saved it from falling off the table. At this moment the door of the dressing-room opened and the nurse appeared, bearing a tray.

"It's time for your broth, Sir Ian." Her eyes narrowed. "You're looking flushed! I expect you've been talking too much." This was a sly thrust at his

wife. As she turned to note if the shaft had sped, she saw the glittering mass of jewels. The primitive woman in her awoke. "Oh, what lovely things! May I look?"

She placed the tray in position and went to the other side of the bed, bending over the open case.

"Do. I've been hunting for my pearls." Clodagh drew them forth from a lower section. Her face thoughtful, she slipped the rope over her head, tucking it down inside her coat. "There!" She looked at her husband, a hint of reproof in the word, although her lips were smiling. "Now, it's time I arranged your flowers. I'll run in again later on. Oh, I forgot the safe." She shut it, drew the curtain across, picked up the jewel-case and, with the tulips, left the room.

Outside, she drew a deep breath of relief. For once she had welcomed the nurse's advent. But what had been in Ian's mind? She felt a sudden weariness. Was he trying to make up to her for his past offence? Or—she felt startled—was he falling in love with her again?

Oh, why did everything come too late? Six months ago her heart would have leaped to her lips at that rare, whispered speech. Now love meant duty. No passion remained; all she asked for was affection, that quiet affection which she had felt since the hour when she had forgiven him. That—and leisure in which to think!

At the end of the corridor she could see the linen room door wide open, and her mother-in-law, Phœbe Mitton beside her, putting out the weekly linen. The streamers of her widow's cap danced in the draught grotesquely Clodagh could hear her determined voice.

"Six breakfast serviettes."

A wild desire to laugh at the word, with its spurious veneer, seized her. She stifled it and entered the bedroom which had been Mrs. Heriot's and was now arranged

for her own use. Mechanically she locked the door and shot a glance at the clock. She slipped the tulips into her jug and sat down in the basket-chair by the window overlooking the drive and the high old trees that obscured the light.

Ten minutes to herself. Oh, for a day at Siris! To stand alone on the balcony and gaze down to the blue sea over the silvery tops of the olives, with the sense of peace and security and of good work accomplished. She closed her eyes and hungrily conjured up the light and colour until the present slipped away and she was back on the island with all its fugitive scents and sounds. The rosemary and orange-blossom, the faint, rank smell of a flock of goats that passed and left the air from the sea still sweeter after the breath of Pan; the cry of the goatherd, a rich voice singing, the shrill and palpitating note of the grasshoppers, never still, and the deeper one of the frogs by the tank, all broken for a vibrating minute as the campanile pealed out the hour.

Never had Siris shone more fair than in the dawn when she wished it farewell, standing on the yacht by Weir, watching the three saints grow smaller and, behind them, a solitary figure in his white "monastic habit."

For Edge had been true to his creed of life and unselfish love for his fellows. It had cost him more than Clodagh guessed to give up his place to Weir. But, behind his desire to afford the latter a last perfect memory, there had lain a deeper reason. He had guessed the battle in Weir's heart and the final victory. For the first time since she had known him, he would face Clodagh in the daytime, placing her need before his own sensitive shrinking from the light. He had offered to see her off at Naples and Edge had assented. He would not even go with the pair and thus smooth the way for Weir when he left the shelter of the yacht.

He explained his design to Clodagh as he wished her godspeed in his library.

"It's a clean break in his habits. That's why I'm abdicating! But I shall be with you in spirit, my child." He held her hand tenderly between his. "I was never afraid. I knew when it came that you'd answer the call. And, don't lose heart, whatever happens. You've youth behind you. Life is full of unexpected compensations."

The kind old face with its dark eyes rose up before her now. Then Weir's—still more vivid.

Unconsciously she dismissed the side sacrificed to his country; she only remembered the virile profile as, his chair drawn up close to hers, they had watched through the long hours for the coast whilst the yacht steamed landwards. Once more she saw Amalfi rise, with its red roofs clinging breathlessly to the steep mountain-side, and the villages succeeding it, strung like bright beads on the thread of the road—that fairest of roads in the South. She had never known the man so well as on that last exquisite morning when every pretence had gone down between them.

Mainly he talked and she listened; for his one idea was to keep her thoughts away from the object of her journey and its terrible uncertainty. He told her legends of the coast; of the sirens who lured ships to destruction from the promontory like a finger that pointed across the blue waves to Capri, and of the wreckers, in later days, trading on this superstition. The island as they approached it reminded her of the Logues, with Sheila's description of their visit. She gazed at the two hills with the sharp saddle connecting them, the steep cliffs and tiny harbour all blue and gold in the sunshine, the winding road, and the flat-roofed Villas, like pebbles flung among the palm-trees, and told Weir of these friends at Albrey, so loyal to her and so happy in their simple country life. The talk slowly drifted back to memories of her own childhood, clouded by her parents' disunion. Weir listened—and understood.

So the morning wore away and, at last, they turned their backs on Vesuvius, with its ashen crest like driven snow against the cobalt of the heavens, and the vast circle of Naples enclosed them. With a start she awoke to tumult and crowds. She realized suddenly the ordeal before Weir in the curious glances cast at him as he watched her luggage being carried up to the carriage on the quay. But he set his teeth and gave no sign of his agony of nervousness, though she caught his stifled sigh of relief as the Jehu cracked his whip and the pair of ponies started forward. She was silent, bewildered by the noise, by the feeling of being caught back into a world of action.

But when, at length, the moment of parting approached, and they stood in the empty railway carriage, she took her courage in both hands.

"I want you to promise me something," she said. His eyes asked a silent question. "To"—she faltered—"resist the spell of Siris! Take your place in the musical world. I know what you think; but you're wrong. It doesn't make any difference. Except"—her cheeks flushed crimson—"that your friends are more proud of you."

"You mean that?" He held her gaze.

As she nodded, her hand was gripped in his.

"It's not pity?" His voice was unsteady.

"No!" She caught his hidden meaning. "Pity's for weaklings. You're strong." The word on her lips was a challenge.

"All right. I'll try." It came out in jerks. "But I can't go back to England."

"You can go to Rome, or Paris," she said, "and get in touch with the right people to help you launch your opera. I *know* it's going to be a success!" Her face lit up, vivid, triumphant. "I want you to be ever so famous!"

The last glimpse she had of him was standing on the

platform, bareheaded, indifferent to passers-by, his eyes following the train.

His parting speech still rang in her ears:

"You don't know—you can't guess what you've done for me. What your friendship has meant. Take care of yourself." Then hurriedly, as the carriage began to vibrate beneath her, "Don't forget the sleeping-car! I wired for a berth, but make sure directly you arrive at Rome. *You'll write*—some day?"

Against his will, the question had been forced from him. Although Clodagh did not guess, it was that of a lover, broken-hearted, already counting the miles between them.

CHAPTER XXVII

ALTHOUGH Ian's progress was slow, there were no complications and the risk of permanent injury passed.

He was now carried downstairs to spend his days on the level. In the mornings he would go out in the car, return for lunch and an hour's sleep; then the bath-chair would be brought round, and, Clodagh walking by his side, they would make their way to the woods, or visit the outlying farms and the stables.

At first she went with him everywhere, his sole companion, for Lady Strangway had departed to Weston-super-mare, Cousin Tibby in her train. There was no gainsaying her excuse, that she needed a change of air. But Clodagh divined her intention: to leave the married couple together once Ian was well enough for the storm which, the old woman shrewdly foresaw, must break if the skies were to clear. Her action showed an advance in the curious friendship between herself and her son's wife that had succeeded their armed truce since Clodagh's return.

In some ways, the latter was relieved by this exodus from the Manor. She dreaded the perspicacity of those beady eyes watching her in her intercourse with Ian. Would Lady Strangway guess it was pity that prompted her kiss when she bade him good morning, or bent over him at night, smoothing the crisp, stubborn hair? Pity, passion's substitute, that passion again could destroy.

But Clodagh refused to look ahead, though at odd

moments she felt the menace of the narrowing horizon. Then she would count her treasures, as a miser counts his gold. Her voice, the small but sufficient income which gave her the clean sense of independence, and the knowledge of Weir's friendship. Combined, they offered, beyond Keyn Magna, a world which she could call her own. At night, the long day with Ian over, she would renew her flight, capture the fleeting pictures which flashed up in the dark, of blue waves and rocky heights that held for her the breath of freedom. She had learnt one secret of happiness; to absent herself in the spirit from the burden of everyday existence. Siris, too, persisted in dreams from which she would awake, refreshed, to the task of amusing the invalid, indulgent towards the fits of ill-humour that marked the stage of convalescence.

Still, on one point she was determined. She would not give up her singing. The trouble was to find time for it, with Ian more possessive than ever, fast awakening to passion and stung by the change in his wife which he divined but could not fathom. Was it possible, he wondered, that Clodagh was aware of the gossip linking his name with Margot's? Inwardly he mistrusted his mother and was relieved by her departure.

With the latter's return to the village, however, came the chance that Clodagh sought of insisting on regular hours for practice. The old lady was fond of driving. She welcomed the suggestion that she should be her son's companion when he went out in the car.

Clodagh broke the news to Ian.

"But I don't want her. I want you." He was suspicious and aggressive.

"Well, you'll have me for the rest of the day. It will give me a little time to myself. For my singing," she explained.

He could find no suitable rejoinder, but he sulked and, when his parent arrived, received her with an ill grace, to

return somewhat chastened for lunch. Lady Strangway, secretly pleased to occupy her old position behind Stubbs and direct that worthy, had taken a high hand with her son. Ian relieved his feelings by finding fault with the food, refusing to sleep afterwards, and by walking Clodagh off her legs in a lengthy tour round the estate by the side of the fat pony.

Much she cared! For two hours she had sung to her heart's content, filling the room with her golden voice, recapturing the sense of power. It was well worth a struggle.

At dinner he asked her if she was tired.

"Not a bit. A lovely day!"

He had never seen her in better spirits.

"Do the pony good," he remarked. "He can hardly get between the shafts. A pair of us! I'm putting on weight. Time I was on a horse again. I shall break out one of these days." He was watching his wife, ready for her anxious rejoinder.

But it didn't come. Clodagh smiled.

"Oh, you'll be hunting in the winter. Cheer up!"

No, she wasn't anxious. He found her calm exasperating. Treating him like a sick child! Looking abominably pretty too, sitting there at the head of his table in the evening light that showed no flaw in the perfect texture of her skin. In some subtle fashion she had altered, the curves of her neck and shoulders losing their immaturity, though she still preserved her slender grace.

Her eyes, full of dancing lights, drifted to the open window.

"What a sky!" Her face softened, catching the lingering glow of the sunset, where dark clouds were stealing up, a curtain to cover the amber and rose.

"Means rain." His voice was gruff. He was annoyed when she laughed. "Well, it does," he reiterated, scowling.

"I'm not doubting your prophecy." A dimple appeared near her mouth. "But it's rather a fine—barometer! To look at, I mean, this evening."

"One up to Keyn Magna, eh!" He could not resist a sneer, "Though of course we can't touch the *South*!" He was watching her under his fair brows.

"Oh, there"—insensibly a warmer note came into the word—"colour seems to run riot. Still, England's very beautiful, with its blue haze and its woods. It's restful," she added thoughtfully, with a swift memory of Weir and his longing for cloudy skies.

But Ian wasn't satisfied. He was jealous of her life abroad. The thought struck him forcibly that he could have gone with her to Naples, the opening of the almshouses postponed until their return. In any case, he could have joined her later, after the event. Again he was bitten by the sense of his folly and his blindness. In his heart he cursed Margot, comparing her with the woman before him.

Clodagh, aware of his silence, looked up.

"Finished?" she asked. "Well, now I'll read you *Soapy Sponge*, whilst you have a 'lay down,' as Cousin Tibby calls it!"

This time her husband laughed, but the lines of his mouth were bitter.

He kept her busy early next morning writing letters and waiting on him. At last the clock struck eleven and he was helped into the car. They would pick up Lady Strangway, Ian explained, on their way. Clodagh waved him off from the porch, then returned to the drawing-room.

"Now!" She opened the piano and struck an exultant chord.

She had not sung for half an hour, so lost in her work that she failed to hear any movement outside, when the door opened.

"Clodagh! I want you."

Her husband stood there.

She stared across the room at him, bewildered, her hands still pressing the keys.

"You've come back," she said lamely. He nodded, and she recovered her wits. "Where's your mother?"

"I didn't fetch her. Just left a message." He swung forward on his crutches. "Looked like rain and I'm sick of the car. There's just as good air in the garden. Come out and sit with me?"

"I can't now. I'm practising."

"What nonsense! You——"

She cut him short.

"It isn't nonsense. I mean it, Ian. You're well enough to be alone for an hour or so and amuse yourself, without disturbing me at my music. So, run——" She bit her lip, too late. The unlucky word had reached his ears. It gave him an outlet for his rancour.

"'*Run?*'" he echoed bitterly. "I call you damned selfish!"

"Why? I don't see it." She turned round on her stool as he dropped into a chair behind her, his face set and obstinate. "Do you think if *I* were ill I should keep you beside me all day long? If you wanted to ride, for instance?"

"That's different. Riding's exercise." He emphasized the excuse. "A man must have exercise."

"And a woman some rest from——" She pulled herself up. "It's no good, Ian. You're better now. Whilst you were ill, I never left you. I let everything else slide. But I'm not going to give up my singing for you, and it means regular hours for practice. Two, at least, every day. It isn't very much to ask. Anyhow, I mean to take it."

"*Do* you!" He lost his temper. "And what about me? When I married I didn't expect that my wife would want to become an opera singer! Your duty's to look after me whilst I'm laid on the shelf."

" I don't think we'd better talk of duty. It's mutual, isn't it ? " She had not meant to say this, but it slipped out. She went on quickly, " I've been pretty patient, Ian. I've waited all these weeks and I don't see why when you're out driving I shouldn't do what I like."

" But I'm not out driving."

" That's your fault. You ought to be. It's doctor's orders."

" And you ought to come with me," he retorted. " I'm not going to stand all this rot ! If you had to earn your own living it would be a different matter. But you haven't. You've everything you ask for." He saw Clodagh's lips tighten and went on hurriedly : " You can always sing to me in the evening. The morning's not the proper time."

For a moment, she did not answer. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

" All right. I see it's hopeless to expect any liberty in this house. So I shall go abroad again."

His jaw dropped, he stared at her.

" Abroad ? But you're no longer ill."

" No, it isn't health." She smiled without mirth. " It's—self-preservation ! I'll wait till you're well and able to get on a horse again. Then I shall go to Rome and place myself under a good master."

" Will you ? " He laughed. " I can stop that."

" How ? "

" Well, it's pretty simple. You can't go without money."

" I shouldn't ask you for any," said Clodagh. " I've enough, with what Aunt Addy left me. In a year or two, I could earn more."

The full significance of the remark reached his senses.

" You mean—— ? " He was sobered.

She nodded.

" If you drive me to it. I've my own life to live, as well as yours. You seem to forget that ? Marriage isn't

slavery, or it shouldn't be among civilized people. It's "—she smiled faintly—" ' give and take.' " Her sense of humour awoke, roused by the ancient platitude. " If I ' give ' you the rest of the twenty-four hours, may I take ' two for myself ? Come ! " She left the piano, crossed the intervening space and laid a hand on his shoulder. " Don't let's quarrel. It isn't worth it. Over such a trifle too."

" I didn't begin it." He sounded sulky, but his blue eyes, searching her face, lost the hot look of temper, became perplexed and then wistful. " I didn't know you were so keen."

The thought flashed through Clodagh's mind that Lady Strangway had been right in suggesting that a firm hand was all that her son needed. But why hadn't it answered before ? Because love had sapped her strength. Now, the rôles were reversed.

" You might have told me. I couldn't guess it." His arm went round her ; he drew her down, unwilling, on the side of his chair. " What you really want "—he was smiling—" is a child to look after ! You wouldn't think of your voice then." He felt her stiffen. " Well, why not ? But, as it stands, I'll agree. Two hours. Are you satisfied ? " He kissed her, hot lips against her cool ones.

She waited, instinctively aware, with a nervousness which she had not felt during their brief passage of arms, that victory might have its price.

" If you're good "—his hold tightened—" I'll take you abroad myself. For a holiday, when I'm well. A second honeymoon, eh ? You'd like that ? "

In desperation she avoided a direct reply.

" But you say you hate going out of England ? "

" I don't know. Latterly, I've got fed up with this place." His eyes narrowed, watching her. " We might go to Siris ? " he suggested.

Startled, she recoiled.

"Oh, no! You wouldn't like it. There's nothing on earth to do there."

"Then why did you stay all those months?"

"It suited me. The climate, I mean. Besides, I found such a splendid master. I've told you about him—Ezio Tiepi."

"Hm!" He was not satisfied. "Who is Horace Edge?" he asked.

She frowned, inwardly taken aback. It was so unexpected. He must have seen her last letter lying on the hall table, ready for post and studied the name and address; for she had been careful to avoid all mention of Edge in her home correspondence, aware of the Heriots' penchant for mischief.

"A friend of mine," she answered coldly, too proud to lull her husband's suspicions by any mention of Edge's age. "A very good friend too. It was his yacht that took me to Naples and saved me a week's delay when I received your telegrams."

"A yacht? Then he's well off," said Ian.

His arm relaxed. She stood up, thankfully, from her cramped position, and moved across to the window.

"I believe so." Her voice was careless.

The action, so plainly one of escape, and her scornful indifference fanned the spark of Ian's jealousy to a flame.

"So *that's* it!" He spoke roughly. "Now I know why you stayed away so long."

She wheeled round, her cheeks pale at the unexpected insult. It had pierced through the guard of weeks.

"How dare you?" Her voice vibrated. "*You*, to suggest my being unfaithful!"

She saw him flinch, but he braved it out.

"I don't know what on earth you mean?"

She had gone too far to retreat, but a sudden calm came to her, face to face with the crisis. She was conscious of some power behind her to which she could not give a name. It upheld her like an invisible hand

helping her over rocky ground. Her voice when she spoke was perfectly steady:

"It's no use pretending, Ian. I *know*. Everything—about you and Margot."

He pulled himself upright in his chair.

"You've been listening to some infernal gossip——"

"Stop!" Her gesture silenced him. "I heard you myself—both of you—one evening in the rock-garden. It happened on the night after I went to your room and found you missing. You remember? I had a bad cold; it was two o'clock in the morning, and I came for some more fire-wood. I waited, wondering where you were. Your door was ajar and I saw you, returning from the west wing. You said that you'd heard a noise and had been hunting round the house. But your words to Margot opened my eyes. That's why I went away."

"You're mad!" he retorted hoarsely. "If you'd thought—*that*, you wouldn't have gone."

"You don't understand." Unfalteringly she gave the reasons for her flight, watching his gaze weaken and shift and the knuckles of his hands grow white where they gripped the arms of his chair. "And I was right. You found her out. In the end she nearly killed you. No, don't explain!" She had seen him move. "I don't want to hear. You can't betray her."

"I wasn't going to," he muttered. His head went down between his hands, face hidden, shoulders strained. "I was beaten—you'll never understand! But I didn't love her. It was madness. You—it's been always you." His words came up, muffled, hopeless. "It sounds rotten, but it's true. I wasn't happy, even then. A damned fool! Don't I know it? I'm fonder of you now than ever, a million times, and you're sick of me! Haven't I seen the change in you? I thought it must be some man in Siris. Though I didn't believe——"

His voice broke. "And now, my God, you're going to leave me!"

"No."

The quiet word reached him. He jerked up his head, his eyes dazed.

"Only"—she caught her breath—"don't ask too much. Not at first."

"*Clodagh!*" He was trying to rise without his crutches which had slipped on the polished floor beyond his reach.

She ran forward to prevent him, fearing that he might stumble, looked down into his stricken face and sank on her knees, pitiful, with the physical consciousness of the link that bound them even now, apart in spirit, yet one in the flesh. His shame was hers, unbearable.

"Oh, don't!" She gripped his arm. "Don't look like that! I can't stand it. I've forgiven you. Let's put it behind us. But try and understand me too?" A memory of Lady Strangway, thumb pressed to the table, bitter, vindictive, rose in her mind and prompted her next words. "I don't want to rule, but I can't obey, blindly, against my reason, or sink my whole life in yours. It isn't fair. It stifles me!" The tears rose to her eyes. "I won't leave you. I *promise*. But let's be comrades for a time? And later—when it's easier—I'll try again and have a child." At the thought and all it opened up—the full surrender, motherhood—something snapped in her heart, her head went down on his knees. "Oh, life's so hard," she sobbed. "To go on, day after day, play the game, keep brave. Plan, hope—and it's all for nothing! But if you'll help me——"

He bent down, inarticulate, his face working, and drew her up into his arms.

By a trick of memory, she was caught back into the past, once more a girl in the dark wood, the wind

sighing through the trees, seeking the comfort of his touch.

But even as their lips met the illusion vanished and she knew that the joy and wonder of youth were over. Pity alone had stayed her flight.

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